



JUMP

THEN

*fall*

ALYSSIA KIRKHART

**JUMP**  
THEN  
*fall*

**ALSO BY ALYSSIA KIRKHART**

*Betrothed*

*Enraptured*

*Return to Me*

*Obedience*

*Surrender*

**JUMP**  
THEN  
*fall*

ALYSSIA KIRKHART

*ap*  
PRESS

# JUMP THEN FALL

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For the artists who dare to dream big.

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## prologue

WATCHING HIM RUINED ME.

Made me want and long and fantasize, the way one does over fancy things. Cars, houses, clothes. Over people who are out of reach. I couldn't move. Couldn't send the correct signal from brain to feet to step forward. To acknowledge to him, to the thousands of screaming fans who'd braved the August sun for the biggest music festival of the year, that it was me he was singing about. The music, the soul-clenching lyrics he'd changed a million times over the summer, the guitar lick I knew everybody'd love, the kind that gets stuck in your head, makes you stop twenty years down the road.

Because what a memory.

What a song.

What an artist.

But to me.

He was a man. A man I'd trusted. The man I'd loved for a precious, precious moment. The man I'd never get over, even though I had no choice but to do just that. He'd helped me grow, while reminding me to hold on to who I was. To never compromise the heart for outside circumstances.

But outside circumstances, they happened.

And I had to—I had to let him go.

His string-callused fingers stole my heart. Scarred me for life. All I knew, all I wanted—myths, legends, lies. He took my paper universe, wadded it into a ball and hurled it to the stars.

Watching him made me burn.

For the nights he kissed me, held me, took my innocence and kept it. For the light in his eyes, the crooked grin when I'd said something to make him laugh, the concentration in his brow as he wrote at two o'clock in the morning.

His passion, his desperation to give the world something to remember, the emotion he poured into every performance. He symbolized all the madness I never knew I had. The desire that stirs and expands inside like a hurricane over warm waters.

Watching him destroyed me.

Watching him put me back together again.

## chapter one

I NEVER WAS MUCH of a dreamer.

At eighteen, I'd lived my life by a strict set of rules. Most of which were unspoken, but more or less amounted to setting goals, working to attain said goals, and making new ones once the old could be classified as achievements.

Acing high school? Check. Valedictorian, Most Likely to Succeed, president of every academic club that looked best on a college resume. Triple-check. Raised by a single father, I'd always had a lot to prove. To others, to myself. To the mom who left us before I was out of diapers.

Dad helped me write my graduation speech. Months prior, when I told him I wanted to study international law, he grinned, put down the book he was reading at the dinner table. "What do you think about applying overseas?"

He framed the offer of admission from Trinity College in England.

As a literature teacher, Dad's rules were simple: read two books at once—one fiction, one nonfiction—and never deviate from your own path.

The night I met Lawson Hill, I deviated.

We moved after graduation, Dad and me. A community college in Nashville, Tennessee had offered him an English professor's position that paid double what he was making at St. Mary's in Columbus, Ohio.

We had no family. No real ties. Did I have friends in Ohio? Enough to count on one hand and have fingers leftover. Not enough to equate as long-term relationships.

House hunting was easy. We took the first place that didn't have leaky ceilings or dry-rotted floors. Got a job, too. Executive assistant to the community college's head librarian. A refined title for the person responsible for shelving returned and discarded books.

It was just a summer job. A means to pass time. Four and a half months and I'd be headed overseas for the next six to seven years.

One other person at the community college filed books: Savana Petrov, the half-American, half-Russian actress who'd played on six episodes of *Days of Our Lives* and a handful of cell service commercials.

She'd spent the first two weeks of my employment relaying all the ways being an actress in Nashville sucked—in supreme dramatic fashion, of course. *I need Los Angeles, Harper Evans! New York, anyplace but the one spot in the U.S. where twangy-voice singers come to either make it big or fail trying.*

She only worked to keep her boredom at bay, not because she needed the money.

"Country music," she said. "Over half the population here writes it, sings it or wishes they could write or sing it. Make it big, go on tour with a name bigger than yours. Pray one day you're the headliner and it's someone else's hungry soul begging for the opening act slot. Endless cycle."

I couldn't've cared less. We might've been smackdab in the middle of Honky-Tonk Highway or whatever else people incessantly talked about in the cafes, restaurants, coffee bars and street corners. Nashville wasn't special to me.

It's not that it wasn't a nice place. People smiled a lot, said please and thank you, and held doors open for one another.

Southern hospitality wasn't dead.

But there was no sense in getting attached. Dad could've taken a job in the middle of the Sahara, for all geographical location mattered. I was still leaving in September.

When I told Savana so, she threw back her blonde head, laughed like she was auditioning for a Disney villainess. We were in the middle of the European history aisle. Someone told us to *shoosh*. From the corner of my eye, I noticed she'd misfiled one of fourteen books we carried on the battle of Waterloo. I made a mental note to correct that when she wasn't looking.

Hired a whole week and two days before me, Savana hated when I went behind her.

"Harper Evans." She'd adopted the habit of using my whole name whenever she was about to impart wisdom. "That's, like, forever from now. Besides, you'd better get used to the music scene, if you plan to live here. I'm not even joking. Music, like, pours out of the freaking sewage drains. Well, you know," she said, sliding a Greek history account between two books on the second World War, "not, like, literally, but you can't escape it. It's everywhere. Better to accept and appreciate."

She started toward the end of the row, and I quickly re-shelved the books to their rightful places. "It's not that I don't like music," I said, catching up to her. "But—"

She turned around and we almost collided. "Look," she said, "I'm gonna do you a huge favor, okay? My girlfriend and a few others jam at Lawson's on Tuesdays. Work on stuff for upcoming open mic nights, that kind of thing. It's fun but super chill and it'll give you the chance to meet a couple of people before you leave. Whaddya say?"

No. That's what I wanted to say—what I should have said. Attachments were unnecessary, not that I planned to make any. I had a feeling Savana and I might exchange texts after I left, but eventually even that would fade. Then again—

My back pocket buzzed.

"One sec." I stepped away, retrieved my phone.

*Hey, sport, Dad texted, how's your day?*

*Good. I texted back. Yours?*

*Long. Think you can pick up dinner tonight?*

Translation: He'd be working late. Two weeks and there hadn't been a single weekday when he'd gotten home earlier than 10 pm. He seemed to like it, though, his job. Said the other professors were cool and helpful, and that the students taking summer classes were a nice change from misguided freshmen. If he was happy, I was happy. He deserved to be happy.

*Chinese?*

*Perfect. Just leave it in the microwave. Love you.*

*Love you, too.*

"So?" Savana said as I slipped my phone back inside my jeans pocket.

"I'm kind of on a tight schedule." Wasn't a total lie. Rules and schedules went together. Besides, there was no harm in prepping for the discipline I'd need once I had my college calendar. One class to the next with barely any room to breathe in between. Schedules were important. Necessary.

"Doing what?" She laughed. "It's summer. You work, eat, sleep and have fun. And this? This is part of that thing called fun. You do know what fun is, right?"

I pursed my lips. "Of course I know what fun is. And I have fun." *Sort of.* "In my way."

"Uh huh. Translation? *No, Savana, actually, I haven't had fun since I-can't-remember-when. Please take me with you! Save me from my life of un-fun-ness!*"

I folded my arms across my chest, arched an eyebrow. "That is so not a word."

"Say yes."

I glanced up at the ceiling, at the single lightbulb that always seemed to flicker, no matter how many times the maintenance guy changed it.

She wouldn't stop. I didn't know her well, but I knew her. She wouldn't stop.

"Say yaaasss," Savana begged, and I laughed.

Attachments were unnecessary. But neither did I want to be that girl. The one who never did anything fun. Who never said yes to invitations or went out with friends like young people were supposed to. I had two years left as a teenager. No one here knew me. As far as anyone else was concerned, I was the cool, outgoing new girl. I could play that role.

"Sure," I said. "Okay."

"Yay!" Savana clapped, then gave the guy who *shooshed* us before a dirty look when he *shooshed* her again. "Text me your address. I'll pick you up at 8."

"Okay." I couldn't understand why I was nervous all of a sudden. Meeting new people wasn't hard for me. I didn't buckle under curious stares. In fact, I found strangers challenging.

Why, then, the onslaught of insecurity? The worry that I wouldn't measure up or that I'd say the wrong thing, make a fool of myself? Was it because I didn't want to make a bad impression? An omen of bad things to come? Savana was a decent coworker and I didn't want things to be weird between us. Maybe that was it.

As she walked away, presumably to go touch up her lipstick for the third time in the last hour, she turned around. "Oh, and wear something cute, okay?"

"Cute?"

"Uh huh." She blew me a kiss.

I DIDN'T DO CUTE. Oversized shirts, shorts, sneakers. That was my M.O. Raised by a man, what else did she expect? I had a firm grasp on British literature *and* American football. Shakespearean plays *and*

NASCAR. Every year's NFL draft was a huge occurrence in the Evans household. I'm talking fries, wings, cheese dip—the works. I had two dresses to my name, one white, one black, and one pair of heels I hated.

So, it was no surprise when I climbed into the passenger's seat of Savana's Mini Cooper, she took one look at me and said, "Sister. We've gotta take you shopping."

I wasn't offended. She did look way more famous than me. Tight jeans, a lowcut top that displayed perfect, tan boobs, knee-high boots. She looked great. She smelled great. And there I was in my black yoga pants, oversized sweater and Converse.

"I put on mascara and lip gloss." Which somehow sounded lamer spoken out loud than in my head.

"Uh huh. Yeah." She pulled on to the street. "All I know is there's no way I'm letting you go to England in the fall looking like a desperate housewife. Who are you texting?"

"My dad." *Went out with Savana from work. Food's in the microwave. Love you.* "Just didn't want him to worry."

"You're close?"

Shrugging, I said, "Guess so," and turned attention to the city outside.

Thirty minutes later we were slowing at a gated drive, where at least a dozen girls stood in outfits like Savana's. Some held signs Sharpied with *I LOVE YOU* and *MARRY ME??* Others were taking selfies in front of the gates, where beyond I glimpsed the kind of home that popped up on an old episode of *MTV Cribs* or when you Googled million-dollar houses. Wide, tall. Modern but in that built-to-look-like-a-classic way. Unattainable by anyone who had less than eight digits in their bank account.

"Keep your window up." Savana used the button on her steering wheel to turn down the radio. "These bitches don't play."

"I thought we were going to Lawson's." A beefy security guard made one of the girls climb down from her perch on the fence.



“This is his house.” Savana eased up, slowly, slowly, her car parting the sea of girls, who began stooping to look inside the car like a pack of velociraptors. “Where’d you think we were going?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a restaurant or something? A club?”

A feminine snort. “I’ll admit, it’s pretty lax around here.” She rolled down her window as the security man approached the car. “But they still don’t let anyone under twenty-one into the clubs. Hey, Mack, what’s up?”

“Sup, Savana?” He gave her a fist bump. His hand was at least five times bigger than hers. “Doin’ all right tonight?”

“Think the better question is are you doin’ all right?”

He glanced over his muscled shoulder. “Eh, well, smaller crowd than usual. Some of the regulars must be on summer vacation with their folks.”

Small? Jesus. Never once in my life had I felt the urge to hide my face. I was the one people looked to for help. The workaholic, the perfectionist, the chick who volunteered to lead group projects. Teachers loved me. My peers, they knew they could count on me. I couldn’t have hidden if I wanted to, especially in high school.

But I found myself sinking into the bucket seat as two, then three, then five girls shaded their eyes against Savana’s headlights to peer inside the car at us—at *me*.

“Who you got with you?” Mack’s brown eyes homed in on my face. “New friend?”

“Co-worker,” Savana said. “Figured she could use a night out.”

“Harper Evans.” I leaned over Savana to give him my hand, which he squeezed warmly. Harmless enough, I gathered, but I sure as heck wouldn’t have picked a fight with the man. I would however make friends with someone who kept a huge crowd in check. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, ma’am. Y’all have a good time, now. Careful pullin’ up the drive.”

He punched a code into a keypad and the gates began to creak open.

“Move to the side!” Raising his hands, he simultaneously waved us through while warning the crowd to clear a path.

*Boom.* Twelve dirty looks. One girl downright snarled, then flipped me the bird.

Savana didn’t appear fazed. Rolling up her window, she accelerated toward the house.

It really did look like something from the pages of a magazine. French-style-meets-Southern-charm, the boxed hedges were lush, the hydrangea bushes overflowing with blue and pink blooms. A single gaslit flame danced over a thick wooden door.

Savana parked behind a white Range Rover. Killed the engine.

My heart was slamming like a fist to a punching bag.

“Just breathe, okay?” She reached across the gear shift, squeezed my wrist. “You’ll be fine.”

“I wasn’t—” But Savana was already getting out of the car.

I followed her, slipped my long ponytail over one shoulder, then the other. I couldn’t place my nervousness. Couldn’t understand why it mattered. Sure, I was eighteen, lacking in life experience. But I’d always been mature for my age. Everyone who knew me said so.

Inside the house, the first thing I noticed was the aroma of leather and pine. Soft, subtle. The kind of scent that harnesses a moment, creates a memory. I breathed it in, allowed it to sooth my nerves. This was fine. Normal. Lining the walls of a wide staircase were gold and platinum records. Achievements, milestones. This, I understood. This, too, was fine.

But then I heard the singing. The gentle croon of a woman’s soprano wove through the air, bounced off the walls of the foyer. The hairs on my arms stood on end.

This, I had never experienced.

“That’s my baby.” Squeezing my hand, Savana tugged me along behind her. “Come on. I can’t wait for you to meet everybody.”

We ran-walked through a monstrous kitchen, in and out of a formal dining room that looked as if it got zero usage, and into what might’ve been a normal living room.

Except for the twenty-some-odd acoustic and electric guitars sitting along the walls. There was a drum set in the corner, an upright bass leaning against a bookshelf, a banjo in an armchair. Mason-jarred candles burned atop a baby grand piano, where the girl I heard singing sat with a guy who couldn’t have been much older than me. His fingers stroked the ivories with ease, and she sang along as if they’d been performing together their whole lives. For about half a second I wondered if they were an item.

Until Savana laid a hand on the girl’s shoulder, and she stopped singing to turn around, her face splitting into a wide grin.

Savana said, “Hey, baby,” and bent to kiss her. “Miss me?”

“You know it.” The girl was beautiful. Brunette with light blue eyes like me, but with the refined features of a runway model. “How was the gate?”

“Not so bad,” Savana said and stroked her face. “I brought a friend. You’ll like her,” she whispered. “You sounded so pretty, babe.”

“Thanks.” They kissed again, thoroughly, and I found myself looking away.

PDA made me uncomfortable. It’s not that I hadn’t been kissed before; I had. But since Dad never dated, I guessed I wasn’t used to affection. Not like this.

Heat spread up my cheeks, into my hairline, and I started taking in the room again. The instruments, the books, the awards, the photos of a little boy with a guitar.

And then.

Him.

## chapter two

HANDSOME didn't do him justice.

Handsome seemed like the dullest, most cliché word in Webster's Dictionary.

Except *handsome* was the only word that kept spinning in my head.

He sat to one end of a plush, cream-colored sofa, the ankle of one leg propped on the knee of his other. Alone. Away from everyone else. A deliberate decision, I gathered, for he was softly strumming a guitar, his head tilted ever-so-slightly. He was humming.

When I was in sixth grade, my class went on a field trip to an art museum. It was early September. Temperatures had reached a peak high that day. Tired and sweaty, we welcomed the air conditioning of the museum, regardless that none of us gave two bits about art. It was an extra credit grade. We sucked up our irritation. There were centuries-old paintings that'd been on the walls for years, or so the tour guide said as we feigned interest, but then she pointed to a section reserved for a local artist. Those were new. Just brought in for a show that evening.

I moved closer. Mountains, beaches and hilltops painted in swirls of blue and white and beige drew me in. In each depiction, a man stood alone. In one, his hands were tucked inside his pockets. The next, they were lifted toward the sky. Whether it was the same man in every picture, I did not know. But he captivated me. My other classmates walked past,

uninterested. Someone asked where the restrooms were, another for the nearest soda machine. I stayed. Stared at the man. Wondering what his story was and feeling, for the first time ever, a swell of *something* in my chest.

Setting eyes on this man was like viewing the man in the paintings. He moved me, shifted the ground where I stood. I was helpless to stare. To stop breathing. To feel emotion I hadn't realize I possessed.

His dark blond hair was styled in a clean-cut pompadour. *James Dean, David Beckham*, I thought, but no. Neither seemed right. This guy, he was in his own class. He wore a brown Henley, faded black skinny jeans and, *God remind me how to breathe*, a pair of custom black Converse.

I was a sucker for a guy confident enough to customize his sneakers.

He hit me in waves. His lashes as he closed his eyes and tilted his head closer to the guitar. His fingers as they dragged across the strings. The foot he had resting on his knee bobbed a beat.

"Harper Evans?"

"Y—" It took two tries for me to gain enough breath to answer. "Yes?"

Savana gestured to the girl she'd kissed. "This is Christina Rose."

"Chris." Christina offered her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Harper, and same."

"Savana says you two work together at the library?"

"Yeah." I glanced at the guy on the couch.

"Hey, I'm Luke." The boy at the piano. He was talking.

I shook his hand, too. "Harper."

And then somehow, somehow, I got brave.

"Who's that?" I slipped a glance in *his* direction.

The flash of his watch as his fingers moved across the fretboard. A leather bracelet with plated hardware. Biceps flexing with every single movement, regardless his arms were covered.

Waves.

“Oh, that’s just Lawson,” said Luke and he returned to the piano, played a jazz riff that made Chris go, “Ooooh, yes! *Let’s.*”

“Come on,” Savana murmured close to my ear. She tugged the arm of my sweater, bared a shoulder. “I’ll introduce you.”

“No, that’s okay.” Bravery gone. *Poof.* Out of here. “He’s clearly—”

“Don’t be chicken, girl, come on. He’s really nice.” She pushed me forward until my thighs bumped the arm on the opposite side of the sofa. “Hey, Law, got a second?”

“Evenin’, Savvy.” His eyes, those came in degrees, too. He looked up once, the quickest of glances in our direction, and then again.

But that second time: a full-on, deep blue-eyed gaze that pushed my lungs up my throat.

Fact: Men like this walked the planet. On the occasions I took breaks between studying, I’d seen Pinterest pages full of them. Models, actors, singers. Men who wore confidence like most men wore clothes. But to see one in real life? Less than five feet away?

I couldn’t.

“Who you got with you?” His accent was faintly southern.

“This is Harper. Harper Evans. We work together.”

“You got a job?” Lines formed over his brow. He was still picking out a tune on his guitar.

“Couple of weeks ago,” said Savana. “Harper, Lawson Hill. This is his place.”

My hands were shaking, sweating. I had this flash of a memory of an old miniseries from the 80’s about Priscilla Beaulieu when she met Elvis Presley for the first time. Inside, she was screaming like a banshee, and he was like *hey baby, what’s up* or whatever Elvis said that made girls’ panties melt off. Would it have been proper to offer him my hand? We’d just been introduced, and this was the South. But I couldn’t possibly. Touch him. Skin to skin. Pulse to pulse. Disaster.

His smile explained at least half of the shiny records up the stairs.

“Harper. Pretty.”

His fingers never missed a beat, and it was as if he was playing the title track to my moment of supreme humiliation.

“Thanks.”

He shifted his gaze to Savana, and his left eye twitched. A wink, a muscle spasm, I didn’t know. Everything about him stood out, no matter how small.

Our eyes connected once more.

“Harper,” he said with a certain finality. Like saying my name granted me permission into his world. “Why don’t you come sit beside me?”

I swallowed, positive at any moment I was going to pass out. Knees shaking, I s-said, “Okay,” and could’ve smacked myself for sounding like an idiot.

His eyes remained on my face, lowering as I lowered myself to the cushion next to his.

“Do you play?” He moved as if to hand over his guitar.

I curled my legs beneath my butt. Shoved my hands between my knees. “I took piano lessons when I was four, but no. No instruments.”

“You like music?”

“Sure. Of course.”

He went back to strumming, his fingers seamlessly jumping from chord to chord.

He didn’t look away, though. Kept staring at my face, his eyes roaming from point to point as if committing features to memory. As if perhaps he meant to sketch me later. Or somehow turn me into a song.

Which was absurd. And stupid. And entirely made up in my head. *Obviously.*

“Who’s your favorite?” he asked.

“My favorite?” My throat went dry.

“Artist. You have a favorite artist, right?”

I thought a moment. “Several, actually.”

He smiled. "Fair enough. Who've you been playing on repeat?"

"Hmm." I looked up, thinking. Allowed my gaze to roam over the bookshelves lined with photos and awards, and awards and photos. All his, I realized, and wondered how old he was, how long he'd been doing this.

Sighing, I caved, "I don't know."

"Easy way out. Nope. Not having it." The light in his eyes, the way he smelled, the genuineness of his smile. It was so much to take in at once. Like standing beneath a waterfall with a kid's sand bucket, hoping it'll all fit.

"I'm a music wuss," I protested.

"Nobody's a music wuss. Come on. Play the game, Harper."

I pressed my lips together, annoyed and impressed by his persistence. "Fine. I'll go with the last song I was listening to this morning."

"Which was..."

"Tame Impala."

His head jerked back. "Tame. Impala."

"I like their sound. It's different. Doesn't fit in to any genre, although I think they're categorized as—"

"Alternative rock, yeah."

He was staring at me, lips parted. He'd stopped playing, too. I didn't know when that'd happened. Chris and Luke were in their own world, working out harmonies. Savana was swaying to the music, a glass of something in her hand.

"Yeah," I whispered.

"Which one?"

"Huh?"

"Which song?"

"Oh...uh, *Patience*? I think?"

"Great choice."



“Yeah.” Hours later, I’d rewind and replay all I’d said to him and wonder how on earth I managed to nail my admissions interview to Cambridge.

“I must’ve tried to work out that piano part fifty times before I finally had it.” Carefully, he set down his guitar. Turned to face me, head-on, and all the blood vessels in my chest began knotting themselves together.

“You play piano, too?” I asked.

“Little bit of everything. All you see in this room, yes, and a few you don’t.”

“Like?” I was eager to keep him talking, to keep living this moment for hours.

“Ah, let’s see. Kazoo?”

I cocked my head and an eyebrow. “For real?”

“Legit. Amazing kazoo player. What else? Um...accordion, mandolin, fiddle, dobro—” He was ticking off fingers, gaze flicked upward. “Ukulele, cello. Harp, but not too well.”

“Trumpet?” I asked, the first thing that came to mind.

“Heck, no. Terrible at brass instruments.”

“Saxophone?”

He shook his head. “Woodwinds, either. They don’t like me.”

Laughter spilled out of me faster than a speeding car.

He was laughing, too, and oh, God, he sounded like freedom. Husky yet boyish, as though he purposely teetered the tightrope between the two.

Then again, no. He wasn’t a boy.

I’d dated. Not much, but enough to block a few numbers from my phone. Some good, some bad. No one who made me feel that *oomph* in the pit of my stomach. That flutter, that sensation of involuntarily sighing at the very thought of him.

More than that.

I'd never been in the presence of a man that made me so aware—so very, very hyperaware of how much of a man he was.

And how very female I was.

“So, where you from?” He leaned back, reached behind for a bottle of water he had sitting on a table. The cords in his neck strained, and I decided then and there I'd need a cold shower, once I got home.

“Is it that obvious?” I asked.

He unscrewed the cap. “No, it's—something to drink?”

“I'm good.” I wasn't. Not by a large margin. “Thanks.”

“You just don't seem like most of the other girls I've met.” He took a long pull from the bottle, and there was something incredibly intimate in watching him drink. “At least, the ones I've met here.”

I'd've bet all I had he'd met plenty, too.

“Columbus,” I said. “Ohio.”

“Hmm.” He recapped the bottle. Narrowed his eyes. “Not an Ohio State fan, are you?”

“Diehard.”

“Wow. Yeah.” Biting his lower lip, he shook his head, set down the water bottle. Eyed me from the side, a grin he couldn't conceal toying with the corner of his mouth. “I don't think we can be friends.”

My eyebrows shot up. “UT?”

He looked insulted, and I almost laughed. “What? No,” he said, hand over his heart as if I'd mortally wounded him. “LSU.”

It was my turn to make a face, and he did laugh. “Really?” My nose wrinkled. “With all the purple and gold and adding *-eaux* to the end of every word?”

“I'm just gonna stop you right there, darlin', before I'm forced to call you a cab home. I try my best to be a hospitable host, but lines are gonna have to be drawn.”

“Clearly those lines merge along the Mason-Dixon.”

He grinned. “Something like that. But hey—” He stood, and his open hand appeared in front of me and I didn't know what to do,

because here I was, faced with the decision of whether or not touching him was a good idea, when clearly, clearly, *clearly* it wasn't.

"At least we have one thing in common."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"We're both strangers to this town."

But he wasn't. He wasn't a stranger. People knew him. I didn't. But people did.

My hand slipped inside his and he squeezed slightly as I stood. He wasn't tall. Taller than me, sure, but only by two maybe three inches. Where he lacked in height, however, he'd clearly made up for by taking care of himself. His skin was beautiful, his body tight.

He released me and a tiny pang hit my stomach. "So, Columbus. You played piano when you were four?"

Shuffling on the other side of the room. But I couldn't look away from him. He was captivating, Lawson was, and I had the fleeting thought he could ask anything of me in that moment, and I would've been hard pressed to say no.

No wonder women gathered at his gates. Hoping for a glimpse. A few precious seconds of his eyes locking with theirs.

"Yeah, sure. For, like, less than a year, though." Dad discovered I was better suited for community softball and spelling bees.

"Let's see what you've got."

"What?" I glanced at the piano, which Chris and Luke no longer occupied. They must've heard the word exit Lawson's lips and instantly dispersed. In fact, they were nowhere to be seen. Neither was Savana. Some date she'd turned out to be. Ditching me within half an hour of arrival.

Was this what it was like to be his friend? To be in Lawson Hill's inner circle?

"Where'd everybody go?" I asked, looking around.

"Probably outside to the pool. Late night swim. Come on." He made for the piano.

“You have a pool?”

An airless chuckle. “Yes, Columbus, I have a pool.” He sat to the left end of the piano and patted the space of bench he’d left open. “Sit.”

I did, because, one, I didn’t want to be a bad guest and, two, to disobey him seemed absurd. If a musician invited you to sit while he played, you listened. He was the artist, not me.

“Let’s see.” He began to play and, I swear, I had the ridiculous but real thought the keys could’ve been sticks of butter beneath his fingers.

Music filled the room. Beautiful, smooth music that made light bloom in my chest.

“Like any of the classics?”

“Like classical? Sure, loads. Bach, Chopin—”

“Damn, girl, you’re gonna make it real hard on me, aren’t you?” His smile was infectious. “I can play, but I can’t play classical. I mean, I can, but not well.”

Of course, he could.

“I meant like Billy Joel, Elton, Stevie.”

“Elton John,” I said. “My dad, he’s a big fan.”

“Yeah? Okay, then. Elton, it is.”

When he struck the first chords of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, my breath caught. Excitement welled like a fountain, overflowed. Everybody knew that song. I’d grown up with the vinyl album on repeat when I was a kid. Dad played piano on the kitchen countertop; I sang into a hairbrush.

This was surreal. Unbelievable. Overwhelming to the nth degree.

But then he started singing—*When are you gonna come down, when are you going to land*—and the light in my chest, it exploded.

Dear God, he could sing. A honeyed, flawless pitch most depended on a recording studio to perfect. I’d been to a couple of live shows. Local stuff, nothing big. But not one of those singers had sounded like Lawson Hill.

I could've died on the spot. Poured off the bench, melted into the hardwood floor. A happy, meaningful death, for sure. Better than anything I could've imagined.

I watched him. Awestruck. Mouth open. A little drool might've come out. I was aware of very little but him. Of him singing, his eyes opening to glance at his fingers as they played the familiar melody, closing again as he hit those high *ooohs* and *aaahs*.

Happiness, pain, contentment, longing. A plethora of emotions passed over his face as he sang and played like a seasoned performer.

After he finished, I breathed, "Wow, that was—" But he didn't allow me to finish, went straight into another number, almost as if he'd forgotten I was there beside him, his arm brushing mine, our thighs touching.

Later, much later, almost midnight, Savana drove me home, and she was talking about Chris and an upcoming show and how stupid-excited they were, but I wasn't listening. It felt like there was a veil between me and her, between me and *anything*, but him. He'd overtaken thought. He'd overtaken reason. He'd overtaken the ability to decipher whether tonight had been real or a very colorful figment of my own imagination.

I had no words.

Words weren't important anymore.

If someone had given me the task of reciting my valedictorian speech, on the spot, in that moment, I couldn't have remembered the first word, let alone the first line. And I'd spent hours nailing it down. Refused to use index cards. *Didn't* use them. Still got a standing o.

So, when Savana slowed down at the bottom of our short drive and said, "I gave him your number. Hope that's okay," it wasn't any surprise that all I could muster was a half-ass nod.

"'kay, well..." She smiled. "See you tomorrow."

Another nod.

Once inside, I came to.

Routine.

Routine was good.

Routine was safe.

Methodically, I checked the kitchen, made sure all the dishes were washed, wiped down the counters and locked the front door. Dad was already in bed, but I leaned in, kissed his cheek and whispered that I was home and I loved him.

He whispered he loved me, too, and went back to snoring.

I showered, brushed my teeth. Gazed at myself in the bathroom mirror longer than usual. Would anyone ever mistake me for a beauty queen? No. But I wasn't terribly unfortunate looking. Light blue eyes framed by full brows I'd resisted overplucking. My lips were a little too full—someone started a rumor in eighth grade that I got fillers, but of course that wasn't true. Plain brown hair, nothing special. What did he see? I wondered. What was it like looking at me through his eyes? Eyes that'd doubtless seen some of the most beautiful women on Earth.

“Whatever, Evans.”

I tore my gaze from the mirror and went to my room. Changed into a tank and a pair of sleep shorts. I was tired. The kind that's bone-deep and requires at least half an hour of winding down before you can get any real sleep. Reading would've been ideal. But then the night had been so abnormal, the book on my nightstand wouldn't have done for an effective remedy.

Grabbing my laptop, I turned out the lights, slipped on my wireless headphones and sank underneath the covers.

And then I did what any normal girl would've were she in my shoes.

I Googled Lawson Hill.

## chapter three

MUSIC VIDEOS. Live performances. Full concerts—some professional, some fan-made. Interviews. Presentation speeches at awards shows. *Acceptance* speeches at awards shows. Segments on late night television. Cameras following him around on tour. Exclusive behind-the-scenes coverage. More interviews, more live footage.

He even gave guitar lessons to an elementary school music class.

Twice.

My head was spinning so fast I felt sick.

He was famous.

That I didn't know who he was? When obviously everyone else did, because the video view count, the likes and dislikes, the five-million-plus subscriptions to his personal channel? The blaring truth I'd apparently lived under a rock for too long—long enough to not know the name Lawson-freaking-Hill? Said many, many things about me as a person. None of which were particularly complimentary.

Numero uno? Yep. I'd been living the hermit life.

Second, I didn't know as much about music as I thought I did. In the least, I didn't have a broad taste spectrum. Lawson was incredible. The man bled talent and charisma. In interviews, he was humble. On stage, he was fire. The crowd loved him. Fans sang every word, cried, screamed

and begged him to play *Maelstrom* and *To Me You Are* and dozens of other songs I'd never heard of.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

He texted me.

6:30 am. As I was waking up, stretching my legs and arms, imagining all the ways Savana would grill me about Lawson once I got to work, my phone dinged.

Clumsily, I made a grab toward my nightstand. Dropped the phone. Reached down, half on, half off my bed to retrieve it. Fell off the bed.

Not my finest moment.

A number I didn't recognize materialized on the screen, but it didn't matter.

I knew it was him.

*First song you played this morning.*

The voice inside my head, the one everybody's got that keeps that inner dialogue going, she let out a yip and a squeal and an *ohmygodohmygodohmygod* that kicked up my heart rate. I rolled to my back on the white plush rug I'd snagged on sale at Target. Before the move. Before this.

*Haven't gotten to it yet,* I typed and hit send.

Bubbles. *What? Columbus, you disappoint me.*

I felt my face stretch with a smile. *Not everyone has music on the brain 24/7.*

*Say it ain't so.*

True-blue southerner. Even in his texts.

*#truth*, I returned.

Bubbles.

Then...nothing.

Two minutes, five, ten.

At twenty, I put the phone down, got up and forced myself into action. Showered, brushed my teeth. I couldn't worry whether or not he



replied. If I'd sounded dumb or chosen the wrong words. I wasn't good at flirting. Definitely wasn't good at flirting via text. Plus, he didn't owe me anything. The experience of sitting at the piano while he sang like an angel? Maybe he was just being nice. Celebrities were like that. Kept their fans close, bated, reeled in. Then again, I wasn't really a—well, yeah, now I was a fan. Sort of. Still felt strange listening to country music.

Regardless, I wasn't the kind of girl who fed into a guy's ego. Or anyone's, for that matter. Texting him again, after I sent the last text? Out of the question.

I met my dad in the kitchen, both of us dressed for work. He in his polished shoes, tailored pants, starched white dress shirt and expertly knotted tie. Me in my ride-or-die Converse, skinny jeans and the *I'm silently correcting your grammar* tee that used to be white before I accidentally washed it with Dad's navy socks. Now, it was a muted grayish blue.

He was handsome, my dad. Tall, toned, salt-and-pepper hair freshly trimmed. One of his first orders of business when we moved to Nashville was to find a good barber and a talented tailor.

"Hey, sport, doing all right this morning?" He took a seat across from me at the kitchen table. Toast with marmalade. Hot tea. Cream, no sugar. Same breakfast he'd eaten every morning since I could remember. "You look a little worse for wear. Trouble sleeping?"

"A little." I sipped my dark roast. Thank goodness for Keurigs; I was the only soul in our family of two who drank the stuff. No sense in putting on a whole pot for just me.

"How's work at the library?" He opened the book he'd been reading for the last couple of days, a biography on Sidney Poitier, to the page he'd marked with a CVS receipt.

Small talk. Conversation for the sake of conversation. Dad had this thing about keeping communication open between us. Even when there

was nothing to say.

“Good,” I said. “Decent. Savana’s been cool.”

“Savana. She’s about your age.”

“Close, yeah. I think she’s maybe twenty? Twenty-one?”

He glanced at me from over the rim of his cheetah-print reading glasses. He’d had a normal pair last week. Black, red, I couldn’t remember. But he misplaced them every month or so, and they’d turn up in odd places like behind the fridge or in a load of laundry. CVS had a wide selection of pink, zebra and cheetah. Hence the cheetah *and* the CVS receipt he’d turned into a bookmark.

“She’s who you went out with last night?” At my nod, he said, “Where’d you end up going? Dinner? Movie? There’s some good ones out right now, I hear.”

Dinner. Movie. Hanging out at a local coffee shop. Bowling. Skating on 80’s night. Normal evening for an eighteen-year-old. For a girl from Columbus, Ohio.

But we weren’t in Columbus anymore and, as Savana bluntly pointed out, music leaked from sewage grates here. Why wouldn’t we go to a famous singer’s house the first time I went out with a friend? Didn’t everybody?

“We actually hung out with some of Savana’s friends.”

“Doing what?”

“Dad.” I got up, trudged to the coffee maker for another cup. I’d have to make this one to-go. The library opened at nine and I liked to get there early, take a moment to browse the new releases.

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t pry. You’re an adult. I just...”

Coffee brewing, I turned to look at him. “You just...what?”

He set his book down. Removed the glasses. John Evans, ladies and gentlemen. About to get serious. “I just don’t want you hanging out with anyone who could get you in trouble, Harper. Okay?”

“Dad.”

“You’ve got a lot going for you.”

“I know I have a lot going for me.”

“And while your scholarships are solidified, as is Cambridge in the fall, a mar on your character, on your reputation—”

“Oh my God, Dad, I have to go.” Slipping a lid on my coffee-filled tumbler, I grabbed my backpack, slung it over a shoulder.

“I love you, okay?” I leaned in to kiss his cheek and he patted my shoulder. “You don’t have anything to worry about. See you tonight.”

“We can ride together, you know,” he reminded me on my way out.

“I like the walk.”

Truth: I did enjoy the walk. Three blocks from our house to the college and I got to pass a florist and a donut shop, both of which smelled amazing, especially commingling in the air. The streets and sidewalks were clean, not too much traffic.

This morning, however, Savana was pulled up to the curb, passenger’s side window rolled down. “Hey!” She’d probably woken every neighbor. “Get in!”

I propped my forearms on the door. “You could’ve texted,” I said, peering in at her.

“Did. But did you answer?” she said through a wad of pink bubblegum. “No.”

Hair up in a ponytail, designer shades parked at the end of her nose, she looked like she just walked off the set of Mean Girls: Nashville.

I checked my phone. Sure enough. Two texts from Savana.

None from Lawson.

“Oops.” I’d left it upstairs. Along with a laundry load of mixed feelings about the guy with blue eyes and a two-hundred-dollar haircut. Which was more than a little ridiculous, when I thought about it. How could I have mixed feelings about someone I’d known less than 24 hours? “Sorry.”

“Well, get in, sister. We’re ditching work today.”

“Uh, no. I’m not ditching work.”

“Yep. You are. Let’s go.”

“I don’t ditch *anything*.”

“Guess today will be your day of change.”

Was she serious? I’d never called in sick to anything in my entire life. “Savana, people are depending on us.” Someone had to be the voice of reason and, between the two of us, that person was definitely not Savana Petrov.

“Called McEntee this morning, told her we both had the runs,” she said as if it was nothing. As if she didn’t lie to the head librarian, our boss, with a diarrhea excuse. “That we’re not sure if it’s a bug or the Mexican we ate last night—”

“We didn’t eat Mexican last night.”

“Would you get on board with me here, Evans?” She rolled her eyes. “Car. Now. First breakfast, then shopping. Chop, chop!”

I gave up. Right there at the end of my drive. Four months, I told myself. Four months of letting go, having fun, and, thanks to Savana, doing a few things out of my comfort zone and I’d focus on college. On the future that was only a handful of years out of my reach.

Throwing my bag in the backseat, I set my tumbler in Savana’s cupholder and fastened my seatbelt. “So, what did she say?”

Savana turned up the radio, humming. “What’d who say?”

“McEntee. When you told her we weren’t coming in?” Because of diarrhea. My cheeks heated at the thought.

“Oh, you know McEntee. Germaphobe supreme. Didn’t even have the words out of my mouth before she was gasping, ‘Oh my gosh, please stay home,’” she said, adopting Ms. McEntee’s warbly tone. “‘*Both of you. Please. We have this. Really. Stay home. You’re staying home, right?*’” Savana laughed. “God bless that woman. I’ve never seen someone who sets a timer for when she needs to Germ-X her hands.”

She started singing again, tapping her thumb to the steering wheel. “So, are we gonna talk about it?”

Warmth crawled up the back of my neck. “Talk about what?”

“Talk about what.” She snorted. “You and Law?”

“Uh, what?” A weird laugh burst out of me. “There is no—*no*.”

“Because you know he’s a player.”

I took the bait. “He is?”

Laughter. The radio deejay announced *that was Josh Cole’s latest—number one on the country charts*, and it wasn’t until he was leading up to the next song that she finally stopped laughing. “Sister. There’s no you and Law? Please. I may not have a scholarship to a fancy British school, but I’m not that stupid.” She cut her eyes at me, lips twisted.

“Savana,” I said, “I honestly don’t know what you mean. We talked. We laughed a little. It was nothing. Just two people talking.”

“And laughing,” she said.

“Is he really a player?”

She rolled her eyes, accelerated through a yellow light. “I told you he’s nice.”

“Okay. So, he’s nice. Lots of guys are nice.”

“Not like Law.”

I chewed on that for seconds. She didn’t say it like it was a bad thing, him being nice, but it didn’t sound great, either. How could *nice* be considered a bad quality?

“Thing is,” she said, “he’s been hurt—shit, he’d be pissed if he knew I was telling you this.”

“Then don’t.”

“No, you should know, because he’s into you and, yeah, it’s fast. Really fast. But it’s Law and in a way he’s like a brother to me, to all of us. We want him to be happy, because he’s been too fucking unhappy for way too fucking long, and it’s fucking up his creativity like a son of a bitch.”

I was too hung up on *he’s into you* to question her excessive use of cuss words. Wasn’t that I didn’t cuss. Finals made me swear like an extra in a Tarantino flick. But four cuss words in one sentence could’ve easily been exchanged with better adjectives.

“He’s unhappy?” I asked.

“Artists are always experiencing some level of unhappiness. Just the way they are. Creativity requires tapping into all kinds of emotions. That’s how the best songs get written, the most memorable movies get made. Those are the stories we connect with. It’s the happy moments, sure, everyone likes to be happy, but it’s also the painful shit we go through. Every human knows what it’s like to suffer, to feel the clench of a broken heart. And Law? He’s in the ugly aftermath.”

My heart sank.

*Who was she?*

Gazing out the passenger window, I ticked a fingernail to my teeth. Another celebrity? A gleaming blonde beauty like Savana? The type seemed to be the norm here. Tall skinnies in boots and jeans with rhinestones on the back pockets. At least five of the same just filed into a Starbucks at the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and Charlotte.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Usual. Different schedules, too much time apart, opposite interests. The bigger issue is he’s having a hard time writing.”

“Oh.” I tried to imagine what that might be like for a songwriter. For a person whose livelihood depended on his ability to not only write a song but a song good enough to make a record. And then to do it multiple times over to make an entire album? I envisioned all the artists I loved, my favorites—The Killers, The 1975, Declan McKenna, Halsey—and the grueling process they must’ve gone through to put out the songs I kept on repeat. Until then, I’d never really given it much thought.

We drove a while, the radio playing music new to me, familiar to Savana. Not only did she know every song, but she could recite the backstory of each artist. It was like being with a tour guide, the kind that takes you by stars’ homes and tells you how they started out poor, living out of their car, before hitting it big. I didn’t mind. History, regardless of where it came from or who it was about, fascinated me. Wasn’t uncommon for me to choose a Netflix documentary over the newest romcom or action flick.

About an hour later, Savana pulled into the parking lot of a corner café.

“Yeah. So.” She unfastened her seatbelt, reached back for her handbag. “As I was saying, before I got sidetracked.”

Easy for Savana, I was beginning to learn, getting sidetracked.

“He has an evening with you, and suddenly he’s at the piano playing Elton John, something none of us have seen him do in months.” She pulled out a tube of gloss, used the mirror in her visor to do a touch up. Popped her lips together a couple of times. “Luke said after we left, Law and Jack Daniels were up all night writing. Said there was staff paper all over the piano, the floor. I’m telling you,” she said, “it’s been a while, but when Law writes? He’s like that fucked up, mad composer from *Amadeus*. Scary and awesome at the same time.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that fucked up, made composer from *Amadeus* was Amadeus. Or, at least, Tom Hulce portraying Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

“Luke lives with him?” I grabbed my backpack, fished around for my wallet.

“Nah. Luke just crashes sometimes.” She ran her ring finger over each eyebrow. Glanced from side to side in the mirror. For all the world as if we were about to walk into a fashion shoot. “His fiancée’s on tour right now. Backup singer. Telling you, sister.” Her visor flipped up with a snap and she zipped her purse. “Everybody’s involved in the music scene here. Someway, somehow. Ready to eat?”

“Sure.”

THE CAFÉ WAS quaint and cozy with brick walls, red vinyl booths and a jukebox. Savana went all out with a stack of pancakes smothered in powdered sugar and maple syrup. Since I wasn’t much of a breakfast person, I ordered coffee and toast with butter.

“So, what do you own besides yoga pants and sweaters made out of old circus tents?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I have other clothes.”

“Oh, excuse me. Jeans and nerd tees.” She gestured with her syrup-covered fork. “Any skirts? Dresses? Heels and boots?”

“Skirts, no. Dresses, yes. Heels—”

“Stop. How many dresses? Two?”

My jaw dropped. “How did you—?”

Her open palm shushed me. “How long have you had said dresses?”

Shrugging, I looked down at my coffee. “Since I was a freshman, maybe?”

“That’s what I thought.” She sucked a blob of powdered sugar from her thumb. “Definitely shopping.”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay, I hate talking about money. Where I come from, it’s bad table conversation.”

“Money’s not the issue.” I’d saved every paycheck from my after-school job waitressing in Ohio and close to two-thousand in graduation gift money.

“I’m not talking about breaking the bank here,” she said, “but a couple of things to go to a local show. You can borrow some things from me, too. Think I have a pair of boots that’ll fit you perfect. You’re... what? A seven? Seven and a half?”

“Seven, but I’m not wearing boots,” I countered, fully aware I’d essentially conceded her victory. But after last night’s chosen attire, well, let’s just say I’d learned a valuable lesson. I wasn’t about to change my whole style just to blend in with everyone else, but a bit of sprucing seemed wise. “Wait. What show?”

“Saturday night. Eight o’clock. Come on.” She got up, tossed a couple of twenties on the table. “We have shopping to do.”

“Savana,” I said, rising and opening my wallet. “I can buy my own breakfast.”



“Don’t sweat it.” She waved me off. “Dad’s loaded.”

Savana only shopped at designer boutiques. The kind that sold t-shirts for a month’s salary and jeans that made you question whether they were stitched with gold thread. I’d been inside one or two similar shops in Columbus. I’d walked out of one or two, as well. Sure, trying on expensive clothes was fun. Getting a visual of what I’d look like if I dressed like someone who had fashion sense. Looking in a mirror and receiving a thumbs up from a personal stylist. If a girl ever wanted to feel beautiful, trying on clothes at designer boutiques was definitely an option. But the price tags were always too much of a turnoff for me. And the sale racks? Never had anything in my size.

However.

Savana’s family owned all three of the boutiques we hit.

Which meant she got anything she wanted at cost.

Which meant I got anything *I* wanted at cost.

Which meant I went a little crazy.

Didn’t help when I was in the middle of going back and forth over a pair of black leather rock-studded ankle boots—*yes no yes no yes no*—my phone pinged in my back pocket.

Figuring it was Dad saying he’d swung by the library to say hi, only to be told I was sick (busted), I braced myself for the worst.

And had to brace myself for a full-blown panic attack, instead.

*Everyone has music on the brain 24/7, Columbus. It’s just not everyone admits it.*

## chapter four

3, 2, 1. *Breathe, Harper. Just. Breathe.*

He was only a guy. A human male who happened to be pretty and talented. No big deal.

As I stared at the text like a kindergartner to a quantum physics problem, bubbles appeared.

*Sorry for the delay. #inairprobs*

In air. He was on a plane. Or was previously on a plane, I supposed, if he was able to text. Where was he going? A silly question, considering who he was. He probably flew all the time.

*Long flight?* I typed, leaning my hip against the checkout counter. Savana was still shopping for belts, but I was worn out, feeling a twinge of buyer's remorse. Plus, the Chick-fil-a across the street was calling my name.

*New York? Not too bad. Worked most of the way. What are you up to?*

*Truth?*

*Always.*

I bit my bottom lip. *Shopping with Savana.*

Bubbles. I imagined him in his hotel room in New York, sitting on a big bed with white sheets. Or standing on the corner of two busy streets, car horns beeping, people yelling, the scent of food cart hot dogs in the

air. Typing his reply—to me. Of all the people he could've chatted with, and I was sure there were many, he thought about me.

*God help us*, he texted. *That could get out of hand. Her family owns clothing stores. Plural.*

I grinned. Typed: *So I've discovered. Nothing too out of hand, though.* At least, not on my part. Two shirts, a miniskirt, and the jury was still out on the boots. They were righteously gorgeous, unlike anything I'd worn before.

Savana, on the other hand. Pretty sure she'd purchased what most would consider a whole new wardrobe. *Seasons, sister*, she'd said earlier as she'd tried on the tenth spaghetti-strap dress in a row. *In nature, there may be four, but in fashion it's more like fifty-two.*

*She told you about the show on Saturday?*

*She mentioned it, yes. Are you performing?*

*I usually sit these out. But I'll be there to support the up-and-comers. See you there?*

Warmth rolled down my face, my neck, spread across my chest.

*I'd like for you to come, Harper.*

My heart was beating so fast I thought I might have to sit down. My knees. Did I have knees? Or had they melted into my ankles? He wanted to see me again. Lawson Hill wanted to see me again. Holy southern summer, had someone turned off the air conditioning?

*Please.*

Swallowing, I typed, *Of course you. See you then.*

*Awesome. If you watch late night tv, check out NBC at 10:35. Talk soon.*

I texted him a thumbs up and did a quick internet search for NBC 10:35 pm.

"Fallon." Savana set an armful of clothes and belts on the counter.

"I'm sorry?" I pushed my phone screen to my chest.

“Law,” she said. “He’s on Jimmy Fallon tonight. The Tonight Show? That’s what you were looking up, right?”

“I—I wasn’t.”

“Get the boots, Evans.” She grabbed a unicorn phone cover from a rack beneath the register. “This is cute, right?”

I nodded.

“Look, I know I said this before. This thing between you two, it’s early-on, fast, whatever, and you’re leaving in a few months, but if you’re into him,” she said, “then be into him. Don’t deny it, don’t try to pretend it’s nothing. Because he’s not nothing. And neither are you.” She bumped her shoulder to mine. “You with me?”

Another nod. It *was* fast. “How do you know if you’re into someone after only one night, though?” I whispered, because Savana obviously knew a lot more about this stuff than I did.

She handed her credit card to the cashier. “You know how they say eyes are the windows to the soul?”

Where was she going with this? “Yeah, sure.”

“Tell me.” She searched my eyes as if hunting for the answers to every open question in the universe. “When you looked into Law’s eyes, what did you see?”

A sensation I couldn’t place skimmed the entire length of my spine. Fear, nerves. I remembered his eyes. How could I forget? How beautiful they were, yes, but a lot of people had pretty eyes. Lawson’s weren’t unnaturally blue or anything. But Savana wasn’t talking about color. When one gazes through a window, it doesn’t matter whether the window is clear or if the glass is tempered or shaded. It’s what’s on the other side. The scene through the window, the reality of what might be if you were to step through.

In Lawson’s, I saw honesty. And kindness. Intimacy and warmth. I saw a depth that defied his youth, like encountering an old soul, someone who’d been here before in another lifetime.

The cashier bagged Savana's items and walked around the counter to hand them to her.

Savana didn't move. She waited. Watching me, wanting a raw answer to her very raw question.

"I feel like that's a little too personal," I said.

"See? That right there." She took her bags, kicked her head toward the shoebox on the counter. "Get the boots."

"What?" I started, but she was already headed for the exit.

"Get the boots, Harper Evans!" The bell above the door dinged.

Apparently, I'd been given an order *and* a dismissal.

I WATCHED HIM on Fallon that night. He was beautiful, brilliant. The perfect amount of shy and charming in his jeans and motorcycle jacket. Jimmy asked about his latest album and growing up as a young musician. Lawson kept his answers light, laidback. And even when the questions turned a little uncomfortable—when he would go on tour again, whether or not he worried if his fans had forgotten him after staying off the road for a year and a half—Lawson played it cool. Maintained his pleasant smile, his easy demeanor. The audience responded to him as if he was the most fascinating person they'd ever seen.

For pity's sake, a woman was crying in the front row.

But it was when he took the small stage, a gleaming white electric guitar in hand, surrounded by the same band members I'd seen on YouTube, I realized he wasn't just another guest on a late-night talk show. Another singer promoting a new album. According to Wikipedia, *Fever Dreams* was almost two years old. He'd been invited, because people were still interested. Still curious.

I was, too.

The first lick on his guitar and the audience went nuts. They knew the song. Thanks to Spotify and social media, *I* knew the song. He sang

the first verse, his voice as clear as it was last night, when it was just me and him and a piano. A sheen of sweat had already formed across his brow. He told the crowd to *sing and sing it nice and loud* and they did. Without him. They took the first two lines of the chorus, he picked up the next two, and they alternated until the lyrics faded into a heady amalgam of guitar, bass, mandolin and drums.

When he was finished, the crowd's screams and cheers were so deafening, Jimmy had to stop and start talking twice before he could be heard.

"They say you're known for how well you treat your fans," Jimmy shouted above the noise. "Now I know why."

The audience cheered and clapped.

"Thanks, Jimmy. They've been good to me." Lawson blew a kiss to the crowd, mouthed *thank you*, and Jimmy went to commercial break.

BY THE TIME Saturday night rolled around, my insides had woven themselves together and everything was out of place. I'd watched a *date night* makeup tutorial on YouTube but ended up washing it all off and going with my usual simple routine. I might've had a new outfit, new glitzy boots that did rather nice things for my legs, but I refused to go all-out like a phony just to fit in.

Savana showed up at seven. Dad let her in. By the way he looked at her, top to bottom and back up again, I could tell he was weighing her. Contemplating her background, if she was a bad influence, if she'd hinder me from rules and routine.

Dad had been doing this to any new person who entered my life since I was a kid.

To her credit, Savana played my dad as easily as she did everything—and everyone else. She listened to him, touched his arm, laughed at his unfunny jokes. I could see why she was in Lawson's group of friends,

why he apparently trusted her. Deflecting skepticism was an art form not everyone possessed. Savana had it down to a science.

“You girls have fun,” Dad said, still laughing at some comment Savana had made about Nashville drivers. One sure way to that man’s heart was to complain about the local population’s driving skills, or lack thereof. “Be safe.”

“Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, Dad!” Savana called as we skipped down the drive to her car. “He seems nice,” she said, once we were on the road. “Protective of you, but nice.”

“He just doesn’t want me to screw up.” I fastened my seatbelt. “So, where is this place?”

“Downtown. Can I just say you are looking especially hot tonight?” She eyed me from the side as if she was really checking me out. “The tee, the miniskirt, the studded boots? Whew.” She fanned herself.

I decided to play along. “Oh, yeah? Well.” I gave her a once-over. Savana was stunning. Little red dress, hair curled and done up in victory rolls like a 40’s pinup model, red lips. But it was the cowboy boots that strangely pulled it all together.

“Just so you know,” I continued, “I don’t put out on the first date.”

“Please, baby. One dance with me tonight? You’ll be singin’ a different tune.”

“So, how long have you and Chris been together?” I tugged on my raw-hem denim skirt, trying and failing to remember the last time I wore anything this short in public.

“Officially? Two years.”

“Wow, that’s a long time. Any plans for the future?”

“We talk about it. I mean, it’s a little hard, you know? My parents, they’ve always been supportive of who I am, but Chris? Not so much. Hard enough for her parental units to accept she didn’t want to go to college like a normal person, whatever that means, and that she wanted

to pursue music. But when she came out right after high school graduation?”

Savana shook her head. “Thank goodness we were already friends.”

“I take it her parents were upset?”

“More than upset, her dad kicked her out. Told her he never wanted to see her face again. So,” she said, “my parents took her in. She got a job at a law office, which, by the way, they love her there, because who wouldn’t? And she pursues her music dreams on the side. A year later, we got an apartment together, and things have been great ever since.”

She pulled into the lot of what appeared to be a rundown barn decorated with Christmas lights. “We’ve talked about marriage, kids, but I think part of Chris wants her parents to be there, you know? And right now she knows they wouldn’t come. Heck,” she said, unfastening her seatbelt. “They don’t even come to her shows.”

“That sucks.” Wasn’t a very eloquent response, but it’s all I could think of in the moment. I couldn’t imagine not having the support of my dad. Sure, he was hard on me sometimes, strict. But he meant well, pushed me to succeed, and had never shown anything but pride, no matter what I did.

“Yeah, well. Being gay ain’t easy, sister,” said Savana. “But being gay in the south...?”

Gravel crunched beneath our boots as we and dozens of others walked toward the entrance. Music poured from the building. Above the covered area that led to the open double doors, a sign read *THE SHED* in unprofessional, hand-brushed paint. A bouncer was checking IDs at the door. My steps stalled.

“Savana.” I grabbed her elbow.

She slowed, looked at my hand where I was touching her, then at my face. Her brow scrunched. “Are you okay? You’re not backing out on me, are you? Not lookin’ that cute.”

“No, but I don’t have an ID. I mean, I do, I have a driver’s license, but, you know—”



“Girl, please. Watch this.” She threaded her fingers with mine and tugged me forward.

We walked around the line. People gave us looks. I tried not to pay attention, but it was hard not to. Savana didn’t seem to care. She walked straight up to the bouncer, *tap-tap-tapped* his beefy arm.

“Savana Petrov. Harper Evans,” she said.

He checked his clipboard. Nodded. Waved us through.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

“See?” Savana smirked, squeezed my hand. “Handled.”

The place was already packed, standing room only. High-beamed ceilings rose overhead. There was a hayloft, complete with real haybales and people sitting hip to hip, legs dangling off the side, nursing longnecks. The sign above the bar declared CASH ONLY and the bartenders were popping tops faster than people could order drinks.

On stage, vertically stacked wooden pallets created a wide semicircle around the band. White lights twinkled between the pallet slats, a Pinterest DIY, if ever I did see one, but it was beautiful. And the band on stage sounded amazing.

“Southern Express,” Savana shouted close to my ear. “Texas. Good sound. They’re just going through lead singers like water. Can’t find the right fit.”

“This guy sounds pretty good!” I shouted back, referring to the male vocalist on stage. He was crooning *Don’t Stop Believing* to a country beat.

“Yeah, but he’s on loan. Sings lead for a rock band in Knoxville. Come on, everybody’s probably hangin’ out backstage.”

Hand in hand, we wended through the crowd.

I saw him before he saw me. Standing behind a row of sawhorses that created a makeshift barrier. Talking with Luke and another guy. Two huge men dressed in black stood close by, tattooed arms folded across their chests. A crowd of girls were vying for Lawson’s attention,

some waving photos, tour t-shirts and Sharpies. If one got too close to the barrier, they were ordered to move back by one of the bouncers.

The nerves I'd spent the last few days shoving aside resurfaced.

Most people look better in photos. Thanks to filters and the invention of the selfie, everyone had cover model beauty these days. Wasn't until you saw someone in person you realized, oh, their face isn't really that smooth or their hair that perfect.

But Lawson Hill.

Television and photos didn't do him justice.

He was much more striking in person.

"Loosen up." Savana's fingers tightened in between mine. "He's gonna be really happy to see you. All right, bitches, coming through!"

Shockingly, the sea parted, followed by more wide-eyed looks in our direction. I could almost hear their thoughts, wondering who we were, and when Lawson stopped talking to set his gaze on us—on *me*, those same sets of female eyes bounced from me to him and back again.

Lawson grinned.

Many brows furrowed.

Someone snapped a photo and a security man yelled, "Hey! Phones down or I confiscate them!"

"Stop blushing, Evans," Savana whispered as Lawson waved us forward. "What's up, Law? Decent job on Fallon, but I've seen better."

He laughed, hugged her. "Yeah, yeah." His eyes met mine from over her shoulder. Then did a slow drop down my body.

I couldn't have staved off the blush if I tried.

"Glad y'all came," he said. "Chris is warming up backstage."

"Cool." Savana kissed his cheek. To me, she said, "You good out here? I'll only be a few minutes. Chris goes on in fifteen."

I opened my mouth to answer, but it was Lawson who said, "I've got her. Go ahead."

As Savana trotted off, disappearing behind a black curtain, I felt Lawson's hand at the small of my back.

I went up in flames. Right there. On the sawdust-strewn, concrete floor.

“Hey,” he said and, Jesus, his smile alone had my pulse kicking into overdrive.

“Hey.”

“Thanks for coming. You look—” Another slow drag of his gaze down the length of my body. “New boots?”

“Savana.”

“Of course. Hey, I wanna introduce you to some people. You mind?”

Did I mind? All I wanted was to be close to him. He could’ve said we were going skydiving, and I’d’ve followed without question.

“Sure,” I said as the tips of his fingers gently pushed me forward. “I mean...no, I don’t mind. It’s really packed in here.”

“A little,” he admitted. “Hey, Luke, you remember Harper.”

“What’s up?” Luke shook my hand.

“And this is Easton Cane,” Lawson said.

A boy with warm, chestnut skin smiled, shook my hand. “Lawson was telling me about you.” Light brown eyes sparkled beneath the brim of his White Sox baseball hat. “He didn’t make you watch him on Fallon, did he?”

“I...uh...” Usually didn’t stutter like a nincompoop. But there I was, dumb and unable to put my perfect grade in AP English to use.

“Hush, man.” Lawson punched his arm.

“Just kidding, just kidding.” Easton winked at me. Flashed a crooked grin that was too easy to be fake. “Nice to meet you, Harper.”

“You, too.”

Lawson pulled me to the side, away from everyone else. “So, what do you think?”

Shrugging, I looked around, tried not to stare anyone directly in the eyes. But that, too, was tough. Because too many were on us. I didn’t know how to feel, what to say.

I tugged on my skirt.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, Columbus, but you’re doing great. Hey,” he said, garnering my attention. His expression turned semiserious. “Eyes on me, okay? Don’t look at them. Don’t think about them. Stay with me. You’re doing fine.”

Nodding, I swallowed for the umpteenth time. “I did, by the way.”

“Did what?”

“Watch you. Last night? I, you know...watched your interview and performance.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Yeah?”

“It was great.” My voice cracked and I cleared my throat. “You were great.”

“Not what you normally listen to.”

“Well, no, but—”

“What can I say? I’m no Elton.”

That made me smile and he laughed. “Nobody’s Elton,” I said. “Not even Elton.”

“Fair. Hey, so I was thinking...” The faintest pink hue tinged his cheeks and he looked down, his eyebrows bending. “Maybe some time you and I could—”

“Law!” Luke appeared out of nowhere, breathless. “Chris’s guitarist hasn’t made it, and she’s on in...” He checked his watch. “Nine minutes.”

“Doesn’t he play and sing backup?” Lawson ran fingers through his hair and, wonder of wonders, it fell perfectly back into place. He must’ve had a holy grail hair product known only to circus performers and Beyoncé.

“Yep. Man, I hate to ask. I know you didn’t want to perform tonight, but—”

“No, man, I can’t let Chris go on without a lead guitarist and at least one harmony vocal.” Lawson turned to me, looking contrite. “Harper —”

“Go,” I said. “Seriously. Chris needs you.”

“I wanted us to watch her set together, not me up there,” he said, hooking a thumb toward the stage, “and you down here.”

“There’ll be other nights and more shows, right?” I knew what I was implying: that I’d see him again. That he’d want to see *me* again. Neither of which I could say for sure. He was...who he was. And I had no claim to him. No ties. Nothing.

“Better believe there’ll be more shows. Okay, I’ll do this set,” he told Luke, “but that’s it. And if anyone sees her guitarist—what’s his name? Jupiter? Saturn?”

“Mars,” Luke supplied, and I had to shove a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing.

“Tell him he’d better be barfing up an intestine, because if he ditched without good reason, I’m gonna kick his ass.”

“10-4.” Luke gave a salute. “I’ll get a guitar tuned up for you backstage.”

As Luke ran for the curtain, Lawson said, “Twenty-five minutes and I’m all yours. Deal?”

I chewed my lower lip. All mine. If only he knew how those words engraved themselves into my bones the instant he said them. How he had seeped into my blood, woven himself around veins and vessels. He might’ve said something different. Might’ve given me a friendly fist bump, instead.

“Deal,” I whispered.

And nearly lost balance when he leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

## chapter five

IT'D BEEN SEVERAL years since I'd been to a concert. To be honest, I couldn't remember who it was. Loads of bands came to Columbus, but I never had the time. School was my number one. I studied constantly, even on weekends. Fun for me meant taking a break from advanced linear algebra to pop a bag of microwave popcorn and watch a documentary. A rare, rare occasion in the Evans household.

Soon, I'd return to that mindset. There was no half-assing college. I knew how lucky I was to get into Cambridge. The acceptance rate was twenty-one percent. I planned to ace every test, graduate at the top of my class. Law firms would beg me to join their teams. As to where I chose to practice, the sky was the literal limit.

For now, though.

I planned to soak up every moment with Lawson Hill.

As Christina Rose sang, he tried to fade into the background. He'd apparently nabbed Easton Cane's ballcap and had sunk the bill so far over his eyes, I could barely make out the lower part of his face. Which ironically made him look even sexier. I watched his lips move, watched his teeth press into his bottom lip when he played a solo.

Three songs in, Chris introduced the band, one by one.

She saved Lawson for last.

“I gotta tell y’all,” she said in her pleasant southern accent, “it’s a scary thing when you got a show and don’t got a lead guitarist.”

A few people in the audience whooped and hollered.

“But this guy right here.” She pointed behind her at Lawson, who was hanging his head, shifting from one foot to the other. “I know y’all think you know nice people. I know nice people. But this guy? He ain’t just nice, y’all, he’s The Man. Know what I’m sayin’?”

The cheers grew louder.

“He told me not to introduce him tonight, but I’m a country girl and you know we country girls ain’t good at bein’ told what to do. Am I right, girls?”

The women—good heavens, the women went crazy. At that point, I was certain every soul in the crowd knew who was beneath that hat. The girls near the front of the stage, they were already screaming his name. He couldn’t hide. Couldn’t disguise himself. They’d watched him for too long. Knew the shape of his body, the turn of his bicep as he picked his guitar. Like a writer who’d found his voice, Lawson had his own style, a style that ran bone deep.

“So, y’all, give a big Nashville welcome to Mr. Lawson Hill!”

In the morning, my ears would be ringing.

The screams were more than loud—they were deafening. Lawson raised his hand, lifted the bill of his hat just enough to see his eyes.

Eyes that were trained on me.

I was certain my blush reached my scalp. Savana, who’d found me in the crowd and stood beside me for Chris’s performance, nudged her arm against mine.

“Told you he was into you,” she whispered in my ear and chills tangoed up my spine.

Chris asked him to sing a song.

The crowd roared

Lawson shook his head, whirled his finger in the air, backed up a step.

“He won’t do it,” said Savana.

“How come?” Clearly, the audience wanted to hear him. *I* wanted to hear him.

“Because this is Chris’s show. He’d steal thunder. And that’s just not Law.”

I didn’t know him like Savana did, a fact that admittedly made me a little jealous. Everyone, it seemed, knew him better than I did. The most time we’d spent together consisted of a few hours in one night, followed by a handful of texts. The rest? I’d committed to YouTube and Spotify.

Chris gave in and continued her set. She sounded incredible. The audience loved her. To see the love and pride in Savana’s eyes, though. That made the night. When Chris was nearly finished with her last song, Savana and I pushed through the crowd and a security guard led us backstage.

The second Savana saw Chris, I was forgotten. They hugged and kissed, squealed and jumped up and down like a couple of cheerleaders. The hustle backstage I could only describe as a handful of people packing for the apocalypse. Instruments were carefully placed inside hard cases. Microphones and amps were stored in upright containers on wheels. A guy with a headset and an iPad checked off each labeled box as it was removed and carted out a door to the rear of the building.

“Twenty-seven minutes.” Lawson wiped his face with a hand towel. Grinned. “She did great, right?”

“She was amazing.” I drank him in. His reddened complexion. The damp roots of his hair. The sweat glistening at the base of his neck. “You are, too.”

His eyebrows shot up.

Realizing what I’d said, my eyes morphed into twin saucers. “*Were*, too. You did well up there. For a last-minute fill-in, that is.”

His laughter saturated me, looped around my waist, settled in between my thighs.

“You don’t dish out too many compliments, do you, Columbus?”



My teeth chattered. They did that when I was nervous. “I—no. I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t apologize.” He was still smiling. Evidently, I hadn’t insulted him too badly. “I appreciate your honesty. It’s refreshing.”

“Is it?”

“Definitely.” He caught a water bottle someone tossed him. Unscrewed the cap. Took a deep pull.

This time, I didn’t look away. I stared as his throat worked. Seized the moment to appreciate the humanness of him. That he thirsted, just like the rest of us.

“As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted.” He handed the empty bottle to a random person who happened to be walking by.

“Rude?” Chris propped an arm on his shoulder. “Is that what I am?”

He sighed. Shook his head at her. “No, but you do find a way to keep interrupting me whenever I attempt to ask out Columbus here.”

He winked at me.

I blanched.

Then blushed from head to toe.

Chris gasped, batted her long, faux lashes. “Are we being serious? I interrupted Lawson while he was trying to be romantic?”

“Nah,” said Savana, “but Luke did.”

“What’d I do?” Luke stopped midstride, a guitar in each hand.

“Nothin’, man. Keep walkin’,” said Lawson. “You’re on in five, and I’ve gotta jet.”

“Aw, dude, you’re not stayin’?” Luke looked more than a little disappointed.

Chris let out another gasp. Her face lit up. “You know what we should do? We should all go dancing!”

Savana squealed. “Yes! Let’s do it! Law, you in?”

His shoulders rose and fell, and his gaze met mine. “You up for it, Columbus?”

Dancing? With Lawson? Now I was sure I'd died and gone to heaven. Or landed in the middle of an episode of some wildly fictitious Netflix original.

"Sure. I'm game."

"What?" Luke pouted. "You're all going without me? Some support system y'all turned out to be."

"Sorry, baby." Chris stood tiptoe, kissed Luke's cheek. "But I kinda sorta fucked things up for Law tonight. Gotta make it up to him. I'll make it up to you later."

Luke grinned, cocked an eyebrow.

"Hey, now." Savana swatted his arm. "None of that. Get on stage, you little man whore."

"Good luck, man." Lawson and Luke clasped hands, did the universal guy hug, bopping each other on the back.

"Thanks, brother."

"Law, you're driving, right?" Savana pulled out her keys, clasped Chris's hand.

"Yes. And yes," he said, "you and Chris go on ahead. I've got Columbus."

"Awesome." Savana beamed at me. "See you there."

My face must've transformed into some expression between fear and shock, because Lawson dipped his head to study my features.

"Hey, that's okay, right? I promise, I'm a safe driver."

"Yeah, of course." I tucked a few locks of hair behind my ear. Tried for a smile I couldn't make reach my eyes.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be alone with him. I did. More than anything. But it wasn't him I was afraid of. It was me. I didn't trust the feelings I had for him. It was too soon. No one fell for someone this fast, not in the real world. He had me under a spell. Correction: his talent, his smile, his easy demeanor had me. Being near him felt surreal and yet, at the same time, too real to be anything but. The ache in my chest? Real.

The flutters in my belly whenever he looked at me? Real. But feelings that surfaced this quickly almost always went down in flames.

I didn't have time for fire.

Moreover, I didn't think I had the heart for it. Not with someone who made that same heart double in size whenever he so much as brushed his fingers against my skin.

I followed him out back and the lights of a black Ford F-250 lit up.

"There's rails on the side," he said, "you know, if you need them. I need them."

He laughed, and I smiled, warmed by his humility. Most men who weren't at least six feet tall felt like they had to make up for height deficits in other ways. Lawson had a big truck, sure, but so did every male in the South. He wasn't special, at least not in that arena.

"You control the air," he said as I settled into the tan leather seat. "I get hot easily, especially under stage lights, but I don't want you to get cold. This thing cools down fast."

His gaze flickered to my bare legs and for the first time that evening I didn't feel the urge to tug on my skirt.

"Why don't we roll down the windows?"

"Great idea." He hit the automatic button for each side, then opened the moonroof above our heads.

I looked up and felt my face split into a smile at the sight of a sky full of twinkling stars.

"Right?" He put the truck in gear. "Same day I went to buy this baby, I'd heard some guy say...or, maybe it was on social media," he trailed off in thought.

I used the moment to sneak another peek at his lips.

"Anyway," he continued, "there was this conversation about trucks. Don't recall the full context, but it had something to do with profit margins and how the manufacturers make their highest profit selling what he called these oversized monstrosities to gullible consumers. I walked on that lot figuring I'd leave in the smallest car they had." He

gave me a small smile, tipping his chin towards the roof. “Then I did what you just did, and something about that view of the sky? Seeing something you know is limitless, yet framed in a way that seems like you’re driving around with your own little piece of it? Selling point for me.”

If music ever failed him, for sure he could sell cars with that story.

“Feel free to change the music, if you want,” he said, pulling out of the parking lot. “It’s XM, so there’s loads of stations.”

“Nope. Where I come from, the driver’s the only person with authority to touch the radio.”

“Where you come from? Listen to you, Columbus. Talkin’ like you ain’t a Yankee.”

“Uh, that would be because I’m not. Yankees are from places like Jersey, New York, Massa—”

“Darlin’, to anyone who talks like I do? Ohio’s Yankee country.”

I gave him my best *oh-no-you-just-didn’t* glare. “That’s what you think, huh?”

“Fact.” He gazed at me from the side, eyebrow cocked, the hottest simper on his lips. Challenging me to prove him wrong.

Which, to be honest, I couldn’t. I mean, I *could* have, but it wouldn’t’ve been fair. Sophomore year, my Confederates vs. Yankees essay won first place in a statewide contest. Not to mention my totally viable debate on why Ohio shouldn’t be considered a northern state would likely be a huge turnoff. I sure as hell didn’t want Lawson turned off.

Especially since his eyes kept slipping to my legs.

But neither could I let him tease me without facing the consequences.

“Fine, then,” I said. “Just for that? I’m changing the station.”

“Be my guest.”

I punched buttons until I hit an all 80’s station. *If You Leave* by O.M.D had just started. When I was a kid, I had a huge crush on John

Cryer, aka Duckie in *Pretty in Pink*. Never mind he was thirty plus years older than me. To my mind, he remained trapped in time. Once a duck man, always a duck man. Dad bought me the soundtrack for my twelfth birthday and, surprise, surprise, I couldn't get enough of it.

Pleased by my luck (finally, a song I knew!), I turned up the volume. Sat back. And tried not to look at him.

Hard, considering his thigh was right there.

And his hand was grasping the steering wheel, thumb tapping.

And the scent of him—man. I wondered if he rubbed himself down in leather and pine until it seeped from his pores. He smelled So. Freaking. Good. I wanted to bottle him up and spray my bedsheets, just so I could surround myself with him all night.

Lawson started singing. Softly, at first, harmonizing with the chorus.

But as soon as the second verse began, the cabin of the truck became his stage.

“If you leave, I won't cry, I won't waste one single day.” A quick breath. “But if you leave, don't look back, I'll be runnin' the other way...” Come on, Columbus, you gotta know this,” he said and continued singing, glancing quickly at me with his huge, gorgeous smile. “Heaven knows what happens now, you've got to, you gotta say you will.”

Every note hit perfectly. As if he wrote the damned song.

“I don't sing.” I did. Just not in front of Lawson Hill.

“Hogwash. Don't make me pull this truck over.”

“Hogwash?” I gasped a laugh. “Who says that?”

“Don't change the subject.”

“Seriously. You're awesome and I'm not anywhere close to...” I waved my hand in his direction. “All that.”

“Everybody can sing, Columbus. In fact, people who can't sing can't, because they don't hear tones like you or I do.”

“Thanks for the music lesson, Garth.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Man, you’re really asking for it, you know that?”

“I’m not singing.”

“We’ll see.”

He flipped on his hazard lights, began to slow down.

On the freaking interstate.

“What are you doing?” I sat up, looked in my side mirror, worried someone might hit us. Traffic was surprisingly light, however, and I didn’t think—refused to believe he’d do anything to put my life in danger. “Why are you...Are you pulling over?”

“Looks like it.” He stopped the truck on the shoulder, put it in park. Unfastened his seatbelt.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you a singing lesson. Come on. Hop out.” He stood, crouched so as to not hit his head on the ceiling. Made for my side of the vehicle.

“What?” I was positive my eyes were bugging out of my head. “Are you crazy?”

“Probably. Let’s go, Columbus. Your side’s the safe side. Open the door.”

I stared at him, blinking.

“Okay, then.” He reached across my lap for the handle, and my whole body ignited.

“The windows are still rolled down! The truck’s still running!” I sounded like a five-year-old telling a grownup *danger! danger! danger!*

“Yep, well, we kinda need to hear the music, which—” Still halfway hovering over me, he reached back and turned the music up. Steve Winwood’s *Higher Love* blared from the speakers. “There we go. Much better.”

His eyes met mine, his face a scant two inches from my own. My chest was heaving as if at any moment my heart might burst out and splatter all over the windshield.

“After you, darlin’.” His breath fanned over my lips and I thought I might faint.

I wanted him to kiss me so bad I nearly moaned from it. From the *wanting*.

“Fine,” I managed, though I didn’t sound very convincing. I slipped out, onto the grass, and he followed. Slammed the door shut.

“All right, now, you know this one, right?” he asked and, at my nod, “Okay, good. Take the chorus with me.”

“Nope.” I folded my arms over my chest. Cocked my hip to the side. “Nuh uh.”

“Columbus, I swear to the god of mac ‘n cheese, I will tickle you senseless, if you don’t sing.”

“The god of mac ‘n cheese?” I snorted. Shook my head. “You are so weird.”

““Bring me a higher love,”” he sang, beautifully, and gestured for me to do the same.

I was not going to win this battle. Plus, I didn’t know how serious he was about tickling me, and I was majorly ticklish.

““Bring me a higher love, oh-oh,”” I whisper-sang with him.

He grinned, reached out and took both my hands in his. ““Bring me a higher love,”” we sang together, and I so hoped my hands weren’t too sweaty. ““Where’s that higher love I keep thinking of?””

“There you go!” he said. “Keep going. ‘Worlds are turning and we’re just hangin’ on...””

I kept up. Remembered the lyrics, word for word. Could I sing like him? Hell no. But it didn’t matter. He was smiling. I was smiling. And the more we sang, the closer he reeled me in to him, until finally we were dancing, and his arms were around my waist and mine were locked around his neck.

Crazy thing? He wasn’t trying to be sexy. Neither was he deliberate in making a move. If so, he was damned smooth. Singing had completely

taken over him. As for me? Yeah, the singing was fun. But seeing him grin from ear to ear as he watched me sing was better.

Soon, our roadside anthem faded into another—*We Belong* by Pat Benatar—and we weren't singing anymore.

His hands touched my sides and my breath hitched. Beneath the designer tee Savana had insisted as a necessary purchase, my flesh burned. Electricity zoomed up my spine.

Suddenly, I was aware of the sheen of sweat along his neck, where my hands rested. Aware of his breathing. Of mine. Of his thumb rubbing a small up and down pattern on my lower back.

Our hips swayed to the music, our feet moving us in a slow circle.

He said, "Great song," and somehow, I possessed enough lung capacity to whisper, "Yeah."

His fingers touched my cheek and fresh heat cascaded down my neck. Drum mallets pounded against my rib cage. We stopped moving and his hand left my face to brace the passenger's side window, just beside my head.

He leaned in slightly, paused. Probably to determine if I intended to pull away.

I should've.

*Too fast, too fast, too fast*, the logical part of my brain screamed.

But.

As for the part reeling with desire and want and need and an Olympic-sized pool full of lust? That part sighed when his other hand drew me in closer.

His lips paused over mine, his eyes connecting with my own. I couldn't think of anything else I wanted more than for those lips to touch mine. And then—

A flashlight shone like a mother-effing lighthouse directly in my eyes.



## chapter six

BY THE TIME we were back in the truck, buckled, and on our way to meet Savana and Chris, Lawson was still laughing.

“You should’ve seen your face, Columbus.” He had tears in his eyes. Freaking tears.

If I hadn’t almost kissed him, I’d’ve hated him for making fun of a serious situation.

“A cop pulled over,” I said, irritated, “got out of his car, practically blinded us with a flashlight.”

Lawson wiped his eyes.

I scowled at him. “If you weren’t driving—”

“Oh, if I wasn’t driving. Really. He just wanted to make sure—”

“He asked if either of us was doing anything without consent!” Gosh, reliving the moment made me blush all over again. I couldn’t come up with another time I’d been more humiliated.

“Well, in all fairness,” he said, sobering, “you didn’t ask for my consent.”

His eyes cut to me. He was shooting for serious, but his lips kept wobbling.

“This is never happening again.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“I’m serious.”

“Me, too.”

“I’m not seeing you again. It’s over.”

“When did it start?”

“You know what I mean! I can’t—” I blinked rapidly, watching the road as he drove, attempting to marshal thoughts that wouldn’t get in line. “I can’t be in a situation where a police officer starts questioning me, asking if...if...”

“What do you, have outstanding warrants or something?”

“No, I don’t have outstanding warrants!” I railed. “How could you? You know what? Never mind. I’m not seeing you again,” I said once more. “This? It’s over. Done.”

He reached across the center console and, before I could gasp or protest or tell him to go to hell, he took my hand and wove his fingers through mine. “Yes, you are,” he said calmly. “And, no, it’s not. Not by a longshot.”

He pulled my arm to his side.

Murmured something I couldn’t hear for the air conditioning and the low hum of the radio.

And kissed the back of my hand.

I  
forgot  
how  
to  
breathe.

“Harper.” His lips moved against my skin and I swallowed the giraffe in my throat. “Have I told you how grateful I am you came tonight? When I’m sure there’re a dozen other things you could’ve been doing?”

Was this guy for real? Did he legit have no clue how psyched I was to see him tonight? I nearly hyperventilated, for crying out loud. Twice. And that was *before* Savana came to pick me up.

“Well,” I said, determined to keep it together, “I don’t know about a dozen.”

His right eyebrow arched.

“Half a dozen, max.”

He smiled, moved our joined hands to rest on the padded armrest between us.

“So, what’s the future look like for you, Harper Evans?”

I blew out a shaky breath. “Trinity College, Cambridge. England.”

“What?” His whole torso turned when he looked at me, then, as if realizing he was the one behind the wheel, he directed attention to the road. “Are you serious?” He glanced at me. “I—wow. That’s incredible. Scholarship? I’m sorry,” he said, “that’s none of my business.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Yeah, I got a scholarship. Several, actually.”

“Wow.” He paused, processing. “But it’s gotta take a lot more than that, right? I mean, it’s Cambridge. One of the best schools in the world. *Prestigious*—that’s the word I’m looking for.”

“Yeah.” Every time someone said it like that, with the revered tone it deserved, I got a little nervous.

“So, what’s the game plan?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re going to England. For what degree?”

“Oh. Law.”

“Law school? Damn, Columbus, that’s—that’s incredible. I had no idea.”

“Why would you? I didn’t mention it.”

“Well, you should’ve. I mean, heck, if I’d been accepted into Trinity College, I’d be broadcasting from the top of the AT&T building. All the news stations would be there, Ryan Seacrest, maybe the Laker girls.”

I laughed. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Bet your bottom dollar it’s a big deal.” He squeezed my hand and my heart fluttered. “It’s a really big deal. What was the admissions process like?”

I thought a minute. "Rigorous. Can I say that? Rigorous?"

"You can say whatever the heck you wanna say. I'm straight up blown away right now." He leaned his head back against the headrest, a reflective smile curving his lips.

"What about you?"

"What about me? I can't top Cambridge, darlin'. Sorry."

Smiling, I tucked my knees and leaned closer toward him. "You said we're both in a strange place. Yet everyone here seems to know you."

"For different reasons," he said.

"So? Where's home?"

He glanced at me. "Foix. Louisiana."

"Foix?" I'd never heard of it.

"Baton Rouge."

That, I knew. "Ah. LSU."

He dipped his chin.

"And this...what you do. The singing, writing, performing. How long has that been a thing?"

"Unofficially?"

"Sure."

"Since I was four."

"*Four?*"

"Old enough to hold a guitar. 'Course back then I couldn't hold it correctly. Had to lay it flat in my lap. That's how I learned to strum."

"Impressive." Using my index finger, I traced the hills of his knuckles. He was holding my hand so tightly. Almost as if he expected me to vanish. "And officially?"

"Landed a record deal at seventeen, released my first album. Self-titled."

"It did well?"

"Triple-platinum." His thumb rubbed my own. "So, yeah, it did well."

"Did you ever imagine it would be that big?" I asked quietly.

Slowing, he took the next exit. “I don’t think any artist imagines anything coming out of his work. You pray, you hope and if it hits,” he said, “you know, you’ve just gotta be grateful.”

“And then what?”

“Then we released the second album, *Fever Dreams*.” He paused, stopped at a red light. “And that’s when the fear set in a little.”

“Why fear?”

“*Maelstrom*. That was the big hit from the first album. It put me on the map. To this day, I still end shows with it, because it’s a sing-along, and there’s nothing like that. Nothing compares to when every single person in the crowd is singing every single word.”

“It’s a great song.”

“Thanks. Wait.” The light turned green, but he didn’t move. He stared at me, full-on, fascination dancing in his eyes. “What did you just say?”

My mouth fell open.

The guy in the car behind us laid on his horn.

“You should...” I tore my gaze from his, gestured for him to go through the intersection. “Green light.”

He rolled through. The car that was behind us changed lanes and put pedal to the medal, glaring into Lawson’s truck as he sped by. *Get a good look, buddy*.

For a few seconds, I thought he meant to drop the subject, let me off the hook.

But then, “You’ve heard the song. You’ve...listened to me?”

“Sure, I’ve—”

“I’m not talking about Tuesday night.”

“You—”

“Or tonight during Chris’s set.”

He had me. There was no use in denying the obsessive stalker I was. Charged. Tried. Convicted. Besides, admitting I had a problem was the first step to recovery, right?

“Okay, fine.” I tugged my hand out of his grasp, retreated to my side of the vehicle. Running fingers through my hair, I said, “I looked you up, okay? After we met, after the piano and Elton, when I got home that night...” I loosened a heavy sigh. “I did a YouTube search.”

“You did a YouTube search,” he deadpanned.

I was positive my face would never return to human coloring. “Yes.”

“And found *Maelstrom*.”

I nodded. I still couldn’t look at him. “Among other things.”

“Oh, God.” One. Two. Three beats of silence. “You didn’t find the sex tape, did you?”

My head whipped around so fast I felt instantly dizzy. “*What?*”

Lawson burst out laughing. “Damn, Columbus.” His fist struck the steering wheel. “You’re a whole lotta fun, you know that?”

I meant to retort. Witty comebacks, I could hold my own. Product of reading a lot and inheriting my dad’s sharp tongue, I supposed, though it could’ve been just me. My inner narrator had a tendency to add more than a little snark to her dialogue. But Lawson’s phone buzzed, and we were pulling into the lot of what looked like another barn but lit up with neon, and I lost momentum.

He parked and answered whomever had texted him. Then tossed his phone on top of the change tray. “Ready?”

“You’re not upset?”

His head jerked back. “Why would I be?”

“I stalked you online. I’m admitting to it. Doesn’t that, I don’t know, creep you out?”

His mouth twisted. “Nope. Not really. Besides.” He unfastened his seatbelt, opened his door and hopped out. Staring in at me, he grinned. “I looked you up, too.”

Shocked, I could only watch, mouth agape, as he shut his door and jogged around the front of the truck to open mine.

“Valedictorian, National Honors Society,” he said, looking up at me and there again was the fascination in his eyes, the awe over me, of all

people, when he was Lawson Hill. “Really, Columbus, I had no idea that beneath all that—” he gestured at me as I did at him earlier, when he was doing all he could to get me to sing “—was a bona fide nerd.”

I’d decided my mouth was likely staying in the open position for the rest of the night.

“Don’t look so surprised, darlin’.” He unhooked my seatbelt and offered his open hand. “I’m a nerd, too. A nerd of a different flavor, sure. I’m no academic. But,” he said as I accepted his hand and stepped down, “I can name any instrument, just by listening. Marching bands and Star Wars really make me geek out. And I can write a song. Sometimes a good one.”

I didn’t doubt it. With the exception of a couple collaborations, Wikipedia claimed he wrote most of his music and lyrics. And not just for himself. He wrote for other artists, as well.

“So, what you’re saying is we’re different, but...the same?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He swept a lock of hair behind my ear and my eyes closed of their own volition.

The magnetism I felt toward him both scared and thrilled me, and when he reached down and took my hand, as if it was the most natural act on earth, I had a small urge to run. To spare myself from falling like this. We’d had one night. Two now, a few shared smiles, and a handful of text conversations. But I couldn’t get him out of my head.

*Too fast*, I reminded myself. There was no time to grow a relationship, to give it the requisite nurture and care it deserved.

But Lawson, he defied the essential. Rules didn’t exist. Clocks suspended and nothing else mattered but the way my hand felt encased in his. As we entered the club, Lawson having given the bouncer at the door a mere wave as an admission fee, I remembered something my senior English teacher had told us at the beginning of the school year. A quote by Walt Whitman.

Happiness, knowledge, not in another place but this place—not for another hour, but this hour.<sup>1</sup>

Live for today. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Too often we believe happiness is a goal. A prize at the end of the run. When, in fact, happiness, knowledge—both are for the here and now, not another place and time. In the small hours given to each person on this planet, the choice to live, to be happy is no different than the choice to have coffee over tea ever morning. It's one or the other. And sometimes—*sometimes* there's hot chocolate. For when you choose to be daring. To put yourself out there, win or lose.

Did I believe everything was that black and white? I liked to think so. Too much thought into any one process yielded more obstacles than results.

As for Lawson, and why life chose this moment to plunk him in my path, or mine in his, I didn't know. Maybe I was in the mood for hot chocolate.

He kept me close, guided me through a crush of dancing bodies. Club music belted from a high-tech sound system. Sweat and alcohol laced the air. I gripped Lawson's bicep, feeling unreasonably afraid we might get separated. I'd never been a party girl. Sure, I loved to dance. In my room. But in front of other people? The thought had me shuddering.

"Cold?" he asked, though I could barely hear him.

I shook my head.

We moved to the rear of the building and a man unlatched a length of chain barring entry to the upper level.

"Sup, Hill? Haven't seen you in a long time, brother, how you been?"

Lawson shook his hand. "Evenin', Arnie. Good, good. Chris and Savvy up here?"

"You know it."

As we walked up the stairs, Lawson leaned in close. "We don't have to stay. I just didn't want to flake out on the girls."

"You didn't want to come?"

"Clubs aren't exactly my scene. I'm not too big on crowds."



“How can that be possible?” I said as we reached the landing. Tall tables dotted the length of the railing. To one side, small groups of people sat in semi-circle booths, talking, laughing, nursing drinks. “You’re in the entertainment business,” I said.

“Yeah, well, it’s different, when I’m on stage. Up there, I can be myself. Lawson Hill, the music-slash-Star-Wars geek.” He looked around anxiously. “Places like this, though, where there’s a lot of people? I’m pretty much like, ‘where’s the food?’”

I laughed, surprised, relieved. Ironically, that he felt as uncomfortable as I did, if not more, made me feel *less* uncomfortable. A thin layer of sweat had formed across his brow, above his upper lip. I swore I could feel his heart rate escalating.

“Hey.” When I squeezed his arm, there was no give. Just solid muscle. “Let’s find Chris and Savana, congratulate Chris on her set, and then go someplace with more food, less dubstep.”

His eyes. Gosh. I thought about what Savana said the other day, about people calling the eyes windows of the soul. She asked what I saw when I looked into Lawson’s. *What does he make you feel?* Honesty, I’d thought. And he was. In fact, his honest, humble demeanor was what drew people to him, whether they realized it or not. And kindness. He was so kind and considerate. Selfless, it seemed, especially when it came to the people he cared about.

But tonight, I felt the intimacy in his eyes. The warmth and depth I’d noticed the very first night I met him. He had my senses turning cartwheels, and I felt drunk on him. On his body heat, his scent, on the pressure of his hand in mine.

“You keep talkin’ like that, Columbus,” he said, “and I’m gonna have to keep you.”

WE HUNG OUT with Chris and Savana for half an hour before Lawson announced he’d had enough for one night.

“Every. Time.” Chris shook her head, sipping something with an umbrella.

“You can stay, if you want, Harper Evans.” Savana grabbed my hand as I exited the booth. “Since Law’s bein’ an old man and all.”

Chris snorted. “As usual.”

“No way,” Lawson said before I could answer. “Columbus is mine for the night. You two have fun. Call an Uber.”

“Wait!” Savana said. “Where are you taking her?”

Lawson shrugged. “Bingo. Knitting class. Shopping for Geritol. The usual old timer things.”

Chris threw her head back with a peal of laughter.

“Swear to sweet baby Jesus, Law.” Savana raised her cosmopolitan. “You’re not right in the head.”

“Love you, too, Savvy.”

He didn’t look back as we made our way out, and I was more than a little grateful. The music, I loved. The crowd and some random person touching me every five seconds, not so much.

Besides, I wanted him to myself.

Selfish, maybe. Irrational, oh, for certain. Everyone wanted a piece of him. I wasn’t important.

But he made me feel different. The person I was with him, I liked her. She was brave. Fearless. This Harper craved the company of something other than a book or the vision of a successful college student four thousand miles away.

Neither books nor school were on my mind when I was with Lawson.

“Do you have a curfew?” he asked as we headed out of the city. “Savvy said you live with your dad.”

“No. I mean, I shouldn’t get home at an ungodly hour, but that’s got more to do with me than my dad. If I don’t get enough sleep, I’m unbearable. Even to myself.”

“I can’t remember the last time I had a full night’s sleep.”

Lawson's decked out truck took us through the Nashville night, past colorful neon signs and glittering city lights so high I had to crane my neck to follow their towers to the starlit sky. Marquees boasted live music and people stood outside in long lines, waiting to get into clubs and restaurants. I wondered how many times he'd been on these stages, how many tickets he'd sold, how many of these people on the streets of Nashville would recognize him if he were to pull over. He'd probably never free himself from the onslaught of hands reaching out to touch him, flashing cameras and pleas for selfies.

"You look nervous." His gaze slid to me. "Everything okay?"

"I've just never seen anything like it."

"Hey, you're hometown ain't too shabby, either. I've been to downtown Columbus."

"You have?" I turned toward him, surprised. "When?"

His head inclined. "Two? Three years ago? Nationwide Arena. Great crowd."

As his words sank in, a sliver of warmth slipped down my spine. Our old house in Ohio, the home where I'd grown up, was less than half an hour from that arena. He'd been that close. People, maybe people I knew, had paid to see him. Bought tour souvenirs, waved lighters and lit phones as he performed. Sang the lyrics to his songs. Songs he'd written. How I'd missed his name in advertisements or mentioned among my peers at school, I couldn't comprehend.

Clearly, I was way more clueless than I gave myself credit for.

"I may give you a hard time for lovin' an overrated team—"

"Not. Even. You do not want to start that argument with me, Mr. Hill."

"—but their city's pretty cool. *Miss Evans*." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Different than here, though."

"Well, yeah. Everywhere's different than here."

"Okay, then. Favorite place you've ever performed?"

“Ford Field’s pretty awesome. In Detroit?”

“That’s a stadium. That’s the *Lions*’ stadium.”

“Know your football, too, eh? Impressive.”

“Whatev.”

“But yeah, last tour we hit stadiums across the country. Ended the year at the Ryman, where we recorded the live album.”

I’d seen the cover of that one: a beautiful black and white photo of him jumping in the air with his electric guitar. Snippets from the show were on YouTube, part of a song, an interview backstage. Girls threw roses and stuffed animals onto the stage. Security had to restrain several of them from climbing over the metal barricade. His energy was unmatched. His charm, off the charts. A single smile, paired with an arch of his eyebrow, and the female-heavy crowd roared.

But even I knew videos online couldn’t paint the authentic picture.

He must’ve been incredible live.

“But that was a year and a half ago.” His smile waned and his stare out the windshield turned reflective.

In the enclosed cabin, I could almost feel the pain vibrating off of him. The inspiration lost, the search for a tangible nothing he’d tried to grasp too many times and failed. She’d done this to him—or her memory had. Whoever she was, whatever she was to him, her absence had left a hole where completeness used to be.

“Lawson?” I looked down at my hands. “Tell me about her.”

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<sup>1</sup> Whitman, W. (1855). *Leaves of Grass*. Self.

## chapter seven

HIS EYES CUT TO ME then refocused on the road as we left the gleaming city behind. “How much did Savvy tell you?”

“Not much. Enough.” But not enough. I wanted to know more. Wanted to understand why this mystery girl’s absence in his life had put a stopper in his career. “She said you haven’t been able to write.”

“That’s not all true. I’ve written. Just not what people are used to hearing from me.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“In this world? It can be.” His hand adjusted on the wheel. “Writing lyrics no one’s ever heard from me before, changing the formula I’ve followed since I was fifteen? That kind of insubordination can make or break an artist.”

I lifted a shoulder. “Worked for Taylor Swift.”

He laughed. “Yeah, but she’s Taylor Swift. She could record a polka album and it’d hit number one on release day. Me?” His head swayed from side to side. “I’ve had success, yeah. Good success. But my life’s not what it was anymore. My music’s different. *I’m* different. It’s been five years since that first album,” he said. “Five years of riding a rollercoaster made up of the road and concert venues, meet and greets, recording studios, interviews, remotes, festivals, endorsements and all that comes with not only having an album at the top of the charts but having *three*

albums at the top of the charts and watching them sit there for weeks. And with watching and riding the high of popularity, which is great, don't get me wrong, but there's expectations. The fear of disappointing everyone if, to quote Molly Weasley, I put a toe out of line."

Kickstart my stuttering heart, a hot guy who could quote Harry Potter? *Swoon*.

"Have you, though?"

"What?" His eyes met mine. "Put a toe out of line?"

"Disappointed anyone?"

He took a second to answer. "Other than myself? I don't know. Probably. Can't get on this ride without disappointing an agent, manager, producer, fan club president, director, receptionist—"

"Is that all?" I teased.

"Gets worse when a record goes platinum."

"Seems like that'd make a lot of people happy, your success making them successful." Paying their bills, feeding their families, keeping the lights on. Normal human needs for survival. I could only imagine how many depended on Lawson's success just to make ends meet.

"Ah, but then greed settles in." He pulled up to a fast food drive thru. "You good with a burger and fries? I'm starved."

This boy. He spoke my language. "Throw in a chocolate milkshake and I'm game."

His grin was back. "My kind o' girl."

We ordered and Lawson paid the bill. He showed me how his mom did fries, pouring both mine and his into the fast-food bag, rolling down the sides, and sticking it between us. Resourceful, I had to admit. Plus, our fingers kept brushing. We rode down country roads, while we ate our burgers and drank our milkshakes. Took turns talking about our childhoods.

"Mom moved us to Nashville when I was fourteen," he said. "She didn't know what to do with me, said I was bursting at the seams. We'd

been touring local music festivals all over Louisiana and Texas since I was old enough to stand up with a guitar. And then, for my twelfth birthday, she bought me a recording session with a local studio, and I made my first demo.”

“You sent it out?”

“To every record label in the country. Pretty much, yeah. But,” he said, “it was too juvenile. All covers of artists I admired, nothing original. Mom couldn’t afford another session, so a couple of weeks before my freshman year, we moved.”

“And your dad?” I asked.

“Never been in the picture. Not even when they were still together.”

My chest felt tight. “Same with me. Well,” I said, “my mom, that is. She left when I was a baby.”

“It’s just been you and your dad this whole time?”

“Just the two of us.”

“What does he do? For a living, I mean.”

“English professor at the community college. Before, he taught English-Lit where I went to high school.” I played with my straw. “But when I got accepted to Cambridge, he decided he wanted to start fresh. Kind of like your mom, I guess. He applied for the position here and got it. There was no reason for me to stay behind, not when I’m leaving in four months, so,” I said, shrugging, “I came with him. Took a job at the library.”

“And met Savvy.” He smiled. “Lucky, lucky me.”

We drove a while. Listened to the radio. 80’s, 90’s, one of the local country stations, back to 80’s. There was nothing he didn’t like, nothing he couldn’t appreciate. The bass line in a song, a well put together fence alongside the road or the cattle grazing beyond. He pointed out barns so big they looked like miniature castles. Then he’d go back to the radio, telling me to *listen, Columbus, listen to that harmony. Perfection.*

He was perfection.

I gave him my address and he GPS'd it, thank goodness, because I hadn't a clue where we were. Long as we'd been traveling, I was surprised he still had a signal. Or that we hadn't crossed a state line somewhere.

"So, tell me, Columbus." Another glance in my direction. Only this time his eyes looked different. "Boyfriend back home?"

I once read that the first true beauty of human life is our determination to endure; that we have a unique aptitude for pushing forward. The second is our memories. Our ability to memorize details depending on the magnitude of the given situation. Scent memories, of course, are among the most powerful, as are any details which play upon the five senses.

In those seconds, my mind cataloged every detail, tucked them inside a box. The anxiousness in his eyes. His hands as he white-knuckled the steering wheel. The sudden shallowness of his breaths. Chocolate milkshake lingered on my tongue. The leather seat felt cool beneath my legs. His cologne—clean, expensive, masculine—wafted over me, dialing up nerve endings, making blood rush between my thighs.

A Lifehouse song was on the radio. *You and Me*, a favorite of mine since I could remember.

"No," I answered. "No boyfriend."

His tension seemed to ease a fraction. "Hard to believe. Smart girl like you?"

"Lawson Hill, are you hitting on me?"

The side of his eye crinkled. "Am I hitting on you? Is that still a thing?"

"Most definitely. Yep. Still a thing."

"Then, yes, guess I am. Although, for the record," he said, "I'm a little rusty, so, you know..." His grin made me feel like I was beautiful, desired. "Be easy on me."

His hand took mine, and I stared as his thumb slowly moved back and forth across my knuckles.



“So, you’re not with anyone,” I said after a few minutes of silence.  
“Do you date?”

“No, I don’t date.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t have the time. Usually, I don’t. Truth is there’s not much to tell. Well, there is. We were together for three years. So, yeah, there’s history.” He sighed. “I’m trying to get back in the saddle, so to speak. With songwriting? I’ve written a few. Several, actually, but I’m just, I don’t know. Not quite there yet.”

I gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. “What’s your process?”

“Ooh.” He pulled in air sharply through his teeth, shifted in his seat.  
“Loaded question. How much time you got?”

“Plenty.” But I didn’t. I had four months. Four months—less now, actually, and I would leave Nashville for good.

I couldn’t think about that. Didn’t want to. All that mattered was Lawson, and that he was opening up to me when we’d only known each other for a couple of days. I wanted to know everything. What he liked, what he didn’t. How he took his coffee, if he drank coffee. What his philosophies were on life and what kind of ice cream was his ride or die.

“Sorry,” I said as he appeared to contemplate how to answer, “I didn’t mean to poke in on your personal life.”

“You are pretty nosy.” He glanced at me from the side.

I tightened my clasp on his hand. “I could say the same about you.”

“I concede.” He sighed. “Okay, my process. How I can explain this and not sound certifiably insane?”

“Is there an asylum on the way back?”

“Arkham,” he said. “Didn’t you know?”

Gosh, I liked him. A lot, actually. Plus, a guy who knew his comics sang to the inner geek in me and Batman was my favorite.

“My process is a little unpredictable,” he said, “especially when pretty much everything inspires me. Music, movies, newspaper articles, online articles, people, experiences. Once, I was having a cup of coffee at

a local breakfast joint, and the couple in the booth in front of me were totally into each another. Laughing, whispering, stealing kisses. But the guy,” he said, smiling thoughtfully, “he started quoting poetry to her. It was amazing. Like, full lines that I had to look up on my phone, because I’d never heard or read them. Poe, Whitman, Emerson. I must’ve sat there for thirty minutes, eavesdropping and punching things into Notes. But that’s what inspired me to write *Annabel*. People thought it was for a girl, but it was because of Poe’s poem, Annabel Lee, and the couple at the café.”

“I’ll bet they’d love to know they inspired an original song by Lawson Hill,” I said and made a mental note that he was, in fact, a coffee drinker. Bonus.

He raised his eyebrows, his eyes focused to the road. “But our love it was stronger by far than the love of those who were older than we,” he said and the hairs on my arms stood on end, “of many far wiser than we. And neither the angels in Heaven above nor the demons down under the sea can ever dissever my soul from the soul of the beautiful Annabel Lee.”

My heart stopped and my lips parted. In the space of a handful of moments together, Lawson had not only severed every belief I’d ever had about falling for someone—genuinely falling head over heels for another person practically overnight, but he’d made every guy I’d ever had even a tiny amount of romantic feelings for seem childish. It wasn’t only his talent or his ability to recite Poe as if he’d done an extensive study of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. It was this. The ease of being with him.

This was not a part of my plan.

He was going to upend me. I could feel it.

I thumbed a stray tear from the corner of my eye and willed my breathing to settle. “That’s really pretty. Thanks for sharing with me.”

“No problem,” he said, but he sounded detached. Closed off, all of a sudden, and I wondered if I’d said something wrong, asked too much.

He drove us back to my house, but I didn't want the night to end. It was late. We'd eaten our burgers and fries and downed our milkshakes. He still had to go home. I needed sleep. Work wasn't difficult or anything but running on no rest wasn't a great look for me.

Except.

I hated to part from him.

"I had a really great time," I said. "Thank you."

"Even when I made you sing?" He smiled. "Or when the police questioned our intentions?"

I laughed, opened the door and climbed out. Turning, I leaned into the passenger window. "Even then. Thanks for dinner and conversation."

"And truths."

I raised my eyes to his. "That, too."

He nodded, staring at me as if he wasn't sure what to say.

"Okay, well." I shut the door. "Goodnight."

"Night, Columbus," he said and as I walked away without hearing the gentle rumble of acceleration, I knew he was watching. Waiting until I entered the house and shut the door.

I smiled, leaned my back against the closed door and shut my eyes.

"And he's a gentleman," I whispered into the dark.

FUNCTIONING AFTER BEING alone with Lawson proved much harder than I anticipated. Routine lost the importance it had before. I tried to stay with it. Read old appellate cases, took notes. I even found a YouTube channel of a law student at Cambridge. Bubbly yet levelheaded and likable, she featured campus tours and study-with-me sessions. But for every vlog I watched of her, there was Lawson to the right of the screen in *suggested videos*.

Resistance was futile.

I clicked.

Watched.

Lost myself in his voice, his eyes, his fingers sliding across the frets of his guitar.

*You can't let this happen.*

I had to pull myself together, refocus. September would be here before I knew it. I did not have time for Lawson's voice, Lawson's eyes, Lawson's talent that soared far past just singing and songwriting. Law school. Career. Established. Attraction was fleeting. I had to remember that, to push past physical desire. Besides, I wasn't a fling kind of a girl. Not just because I'd disciplined myself to concentrate on my future, but I couldn't get involved with a boy without emotional attachment. And the more time I spent with Lawson Hill, I knew—I knew for a fact that to detach myself from him, which was exactly what I'd have to do in the end, would rip me open.

I shut my laptop at the same time my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

**Savana:** Sup, girl, you still alive?

Sighing, I grabbed my phone and answered her with the truth.

**Me:** Questionable.

**Savana:** Not much sleep, huh? 😊

How did she know? I smiled, despite myself. Despite subscribing to Lawson's YouTube channel, sorting from oldest to newest and hitting play. Pa-the-tic.

**Me:** Bingo.

**Savana:** Epic night. Chris is still on cloud 9. Bet you are tooooooo.

I should've been. I was. We'd had a great night. Not a typical first... date? Was that right? We'd started out with a group. We didn't arrive together. But we left together. It *felt* like a date. He held my hand. We talked. Laughed. Shared personal stories. Sang. Danced. Nearly kissed, would have, possibly, maybe, if it hadn't been for the cop and his dumb flashlight.

He asked if I had a boyfriend.

He asked if I had a boyfriend.

He asked if I had a boyfriend.

“Shit.” I sounded like a middle schooler. Analyzing every second spent with the boy she liked. *He did all these really cool but possibly insignificant but totally meaningful things—am I going crazy?*

**Me:** Yes. A little.

Confliction weighed heavy on my shoulders, harder than a hung jury. I hadn’t heard from him. No call, no text. But then it was only four o’clock in the afternoon and we weren’t dating. He was probably busy. Or sleeping. Or not thinking about me at all, because there was that possibility, too. Maybe he was feeling the same feelings. Maybe he didn’t have time for me. He had songs to write, albums to make, tours to book. How could I fit in to any slot of that kind of life? I couldn’t. We were on completely separate paths, Lawson Hill and I. Fame and fortune. Law school and career. With a big, thick wall of *dream-on-sister* in between.

**Me:** Thanks for inviting me. I had a good time. Gotta get back to researching.

The phone lit up with Savana’s smiling face and the chorus of *Can’t Stop the Feeling* by Justin Timberlake. Funny thing: I didn’t remember assigning her a photo and a ringtone.

I hit the green *accept* button. “Hey.”

“What do you mean, researching? Aren’t you at Law’s?”

“Afternoon to you, too. Why would I be at Lawson’s?”

“Uh, because you left together last night, and I haven’t heard from you? *Either* of you?”

“Oh.”

She laughed. “Jeez, girl, you are somethin’ else. Is he still sleeping?”

“Is who still sleeping?”

“Is who still sleeping...you really are out of it. Law, you big dummy. Is he up and recording or too wiped out to function?”

“How would I know if—” My eyes went wide. Fire ratcheted up my cheeks to the tips of my ears. “Wait a minute.” My voice shook. “You

thought that we...?”

“Bumped uglies? Hell yeah, girl. Did you honestly think we’d miss the way he was looking at you all night? Swear to God, I thought he’d crack a note on stage, he was so wrapped up in making moo-moo eyes at you in the crowd. And then afterwards? When he couldn’t even stay half an hour with us at the club? He’s got it bad. *Real* bad.”

Did he? Did I? Stupid question. If YouTube history could confirm enough evidence to charge someone with stalking, I’d’ve been read my rights and handcuffed twelve videos ago.

I glanced down at my hand in my lap. “Sorry to disappoint you, but we didn’t have sex.” And yet the sudden thought of sleeping with him, of his arms wrapped around me, feeling his body on top of mine, inside of me...The image wove around my waist and in between my thighs as if I’d sunk into a hot bath.

I crossed my legs.

“Sister. Are you kidding me?”

I drew in a shaky breath. “Afraid not. We just hung out a while and he took me home. End of story.”

“End of story. Yeah. Fat chance of that happening.”

My brow tightened. “Why do you say that?”

“Because...” She took a sip of something. “Lawson’s not the type to let go of something he likes, and he likes you.”

*And I like him. Way more than I should.* The words sat on the tip of my tongue, startling me. But I couldn’t tell Savana that. She’d tell Lawson, and...no. Just no.

“I don’t see how anything could come of it,” I said. “I’m leaving in a few months, and he’s...well, he’s obviously got a lot going on.”

“Harper Evans, will you for once stop thinking about your rules and your schedule? Yeah, you’re going to college in the fall. That’s great. It’s spectacular. But what about all the days in between? What about living your life right *now*?”

She was right. Savana was crazy and spontaneous, and I...I lived by a virtual calendar, same as I would when I started college, as I would working for a law firm. But she was right. I had a handful of weeks before I had to be on university time. Before the rest of my life.

“Expectations,” I said, “make it difficult for me to concentrate on the here and now. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. It does. But hey, it’s also okay to expect to make every minute count, right?” She laughed. “That’s what Chris says, anyway. Wake up every morning and start your day on purpose. She says that, too.”

Chris was maybe the smartest person I knew.

“So, you guys hit it off, right?” she asked as my phone pinged with a notification.

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s wonderful.”

“Then let him be wonderful to you. Give him a chance.”

“I gotta go,” I told her. “See you at work tomorrow?”

“See you.”

I hung up and checked the notification on my phone. YouTube. *Lawson Hill just uploaded a video.* The next instant, a text popped up.

**Lawson:** To this girl I met who *can* sing.

Exhilaration zoomed inside my chest, and I pulled up the YouTube app, where Lawson’s smiling face greeted me right at the top. I clicked. Took a deep breath. The video faded into Lawson, sitting on his piano stool, an acoustic guitar in his lap.

“Hey, what’s up, it’s Lawson Hill.” His smile sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. He was wearing a forest green Henley, rolled up to his elbows and unbuttoned at the collar to reveal a sliver of smooth chest. “Been a while since I uploaded, and thought I’d do something different. Just for fun. I don’t know. We’ll see what happens. Hope you like it.”

He tapped off a beat to the sound board—*two, three, four*—and began strumming a melody I instantly recognized. He opened his mouth to sing. My heart rose, pounding.

*What day is it*

*And in what month?  
This clock never seemed so alive  
I can't keep up, and I can't back down  
I've been losing so much time*

He didn't sing exactly like Jason Wade. But he sang like him—like Lawson. Warm, rich, and with such feeling the lyrics paired with the acoustic strings bit into me. Hard. Deep. He squinted his eyes and smiled in some places, cocked an eyebrow and grew serious in others. By the time he was finished, nodding to the camera and saying, "Thanks for watching," I was breathing as if I'd just put myself through an hour of cardio.

I picked up my phone. Typed, *That was incredible*, looked it over. Backspaced. Too gushy and not meaningful enough. He was more than incredible. More than amazing, spectacular, astoundingly gifted.

He was different.

Opening my laptop, I did a quick search. Smiled as I read the poem that he'd recited a piece of last night. As he turned my world upside down, I reminded myself. He had a knack for doing that, and we'd only known each other days.

I typed, *And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes of the beautiful Annabel Lee...* and hit send.



## chapter eight

AFTER MY SHIFT at the library the next day, as I was sludging my way home through a rainstorm (thank goodness I'd read the forecast and remembered an umbrella and rainboots), my phone lit up with a call from Lawson.

My heart started racing around my chest cavity like a caged jackrabbit.

"Hello?" *Breathe, Harper. B-R-E-A-T-H-E.*

"So, I've got you reading Poe, huh?"

I grinned, despite the weather. Despite the slant of the rain making my umbrella almost useless and the urge to put him on mute just so I could scream. "I'll have you know I was reading Poe long before I met you, Lawson Hill."

"Lies." I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Truth, actually. The second semester of my junior literature class was all nineteenth century American authors and poets."

"What was the first semester?"

"Eighteenth century." I skipped over a puddle, stepped onto the sidewalk that led home. "Didn't you study literature in high school?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it studying," he said. "I wasn't terrible or anything, but my focus wasn't on academics."

"Oh?"

“Nah. School was more like a day job I endured, so I could practice until my fingers bled. I had a gig almost every Friday and Saturday night.”

“Wow. So, no Friday night lights for you, huh?”

“Rarely, although I do love football. How was work?”

“Uneventful. Well,” I said, “I say that, but it was my turn to clean out and sort through the book drop this morning.”

“Uh huh?”

“Which isn’t usually very exciting, save for my nosiness over what people are reading.”

“We did establish you’re pretty nosy.”

“Hush.”

“Sorry. Hushing.” He cleared his throat. “You were saying?”

“So, the door was jammed, and I thought, wow that’s a lot of books, but no...not books. Some books, yeah, but there was something lodged in the hinge of the door.”

“Oh, God. Please say it wasn’t some kind of small animal.”

“Worse. It was a dildo.”

He coughed a laugh. “Holy—are you serious?”

“Yep. Big, purple and wobbly. Just tucked inside the door, right next to a copy of Moby Dick.” After I’d gotten over the shock, gagged once, I’d made a dash for the janitor’s office and, God bless him, he’d snapped on a pair of gloves, as if he was about to perform surgery—in a way, he was, now that I thought about—and removed the thing. Tossed it in the garbage, along with the used condom that had fallen out of chapter two of Moby Dick.

Other than a rough lesson in what *not* to do with your sex toys, the day had been ordinary.

Lawson was laughing so hard in my ear, I nearly failed to notice the large truck parked in front of my house. The windshield wipers swished back and forth. Low beam lights glowed in the dimness of the afternoon.

In the driver's seat, Lawson watched, phone pressed to his ear, his laughter fading as I stopped and stared back at him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hey," I softly returned.

"Presumptuous of me to sit outside your door, waiting for you to get home, but..."

"Not so presumptuous." It was sweet and sexy, and my heart was tripling in size. "How long have you been waiting?"

"Not long. Savvy gave me a heads up."

"Right."

For a moment there was silence and then he said, "So, are you just gonna stand there like we're filming a long-distance phone commercial or are you gonna—you know what? Don't answer that. I'm hanging up now."

His headlights flicked off, engine died and the next minute his door was opening, and he was stepping out into the rain, no umbrella, nothing covering his head.

My feet set into motion, as did his, and we met on the sidewalk so fast, both of us laughing, we nearly collided. My umbrella toppled to the side.

"Whoa," he said, catching it. His other hand settled on my waist. "You intent on soaking me to the bone?"

"What are you doing here?" I was still laughing, happy to see him and instantly wrapped up in his nearness. He was warm and he smelled clean, and the streetlights bathed his face so that his lashes looked longer, his smile brighter.

"Came to see you, of course." He gazed down at me, eyebrows raised. "Guess I should've asked first."

I set my hands to his chest and he drew in a breath. "You don't have to ask. I'm surprised, that's all, and surprises aren't something I'm used to."

"Well, that's just gonna have to be somethin' we remedy, isn't it?"

I smashed my lips together. Stared up at him, heart racing, drinking him in. He was full of surprises, Lawson was. No denying it. I adored that about him; senseless as that sounded considering I couldn't X off many days since we'd met, but the adoration felt right, all the same. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met. Around us, rain pattered the streets and sidewalks. Thunder rumbled in its soothing bass tones. The aroma of stirred earth laced the air. And Lawson was the most handsome boy I'd ever seen. He was busy, had things to do, songs to write, tracks to lay down, tours to book. Instead, he'd sat outside my house, waiting for me to get home from work.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, mildly aware that I was still touching him, and he was still touching me, and we were standing really, really close beneath the dome of my small umbrella.

His gaze lifted somewhere above my brow. "I could eat. What are you in the mood for?"

*You, Lawson. I'm in the mood for you.* "Well, my dad cooked. He does that."

His eyebrows inched up. "He's a professor-chef?"

"Amateur chef," I corrected. When Dad texted earlier that he'd have a big pot of roasted pepper penne and hot garlic bread waiting for me when I got home, my stomach grumbled in anticipation. He loved to cook, and he was darned good at it. Sausage and fennel lasagna, chicken rigatoni, sirloin with garlic and herb potatoes. While takeout hit our table often, especially with a professor's schedule, when he whipped up a homecooked meal, I stuffed myself into a food coma almost every time.

"You wanna...you know. Eat with us?" I asked.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

A boy my dad didn't know, had never met, probably didn't even know existed, coming over for dinner at the last minute? Sure. It would be fine.

"Come on."

Lawson shook out the umbrella as best he could outside before closing it and setting it in a corner by the door in our small foyer. He looked around and I could only imagine what he was thinking. He was accustomed to his large home with its palatial staircase and professionally painted molding. Dad and I had done everything ourselves, from the cornflower blue walls to the tile in the master bath.

"It's not much," I said, feeling as if I needed to provide an explanation, "but we don't need much."

"It's great, Harper." I loved the way he said my name. His gaze landed on the Kincade painting above the mantle in the living room. "It reminds me of our house in Louisiana."

"Small?"

His eyes found mine. "Home."

I opened my mouth to speak, but my dad yelled, "Hey-ooo!" as always when he got home before I did.

"Hi, Dad!" I called back and Lawson grinned. "Shoes at the door please," I whispered.

"Everything's ready, except for the bread. Come get it buttered for me, would you?"

"Be right there!" I slipped off my Chucks and let out a soft gasp as Lawson bent and took my shoes, placing them next to his.

"Thanks, but you didn't have to—"

"Stop, Columbus. It's okay if someone does something for you. Besides, it's just shoes."

"Just shoes," I parroted like an idiot.

"Come on." He grabbed my hand. "I wanna meet your dad."

DAD REACTED AS I EXPECTED. Shocked, though he tried to hide it, especially when Lawson didn't miss a beat, stuck out his hand and introduced himself immediately. *Hi, I'm Lawson—Lawson Hill. Nice to meet you, Mr. Evans.* Quiet, though I could tell by the way his gaze shot

between me and Lawson and back again, he had at least fifty questions. Who, what, when, where and, most importantly, *how*? How, when I knew no one, went nowhere, save for work and home, did I have two breaths to spare to meet a guy *and* bring him home?

“Can I help?” Lawson asked as I started slicing a fresh loaf of French bread.

“Uh...” I looked at him, the bread, my hands. My cheeks burned. “Sure.”

“Butter, garlic, Italian seasoning.” He had already found the spice cabinet, a small bowl and a spoon before I’d finished cutting.

I smiled. “You know what you’re doing there?”

“Believe it or not, yeah.” He plopped a stick of butter in the bowl, nuked it in the microwave just enough to soften it, then started mixing ingredients for a spread. Our elbows bumped and he looked at me from the side, winked.

I tucked my chin, tried to concentrate on placing the bread slices on a cookie sheet. Hard to do when he was in my house, in my space, in the same room with my dad, helping with dinner.

*Surreal* was the first word that came to mind.

The next was *Keep*, followed by *It* and *Together*.

“So, you cook, Mr. Hill?” Dad asked as he was setting the table.

Lawson glanced at him, diligently stirring the butter and herb mixture. “Yes, sir. Dabbled a bit here and there. When we moved to Nashville, Mom was working two jobs, and I didn’t want her to have to come home and feel as if she had to cook, so...” He shrugged. “I learned how. Started with pasta, didn’t burn it. Boosted my confidence, started experimenting.”

“Huh. Well.” Dad cleared his throat, and I bit my lip to hide my smile. “That’s admirable.”

“Thank you,” he said, murmuring a *thanks* as I handed him a knife and we started buttering the bread. “Columbus—ah, Harper tells me

you like to cook, too.”

Dad wiped his hands with a towel. “I dabble.” He wasn’t smiling.

I shot him A Look, which he ignored and poured glasses of ice water. I hadn’t brought a lot of guys home to meet him since I started dating, which I never really *dated*-dated, and I felt silly presuming that’s what Lawson and I were doing, even though it certainly felt that way, but Dad, gosh, Dad had never been this...*affronted* over a boy I liked. Rude? No, he wasn’t being rude. More like passive-aggressive, which I hated, because one, that wasn’t the John Evans I knew and, two, Lawson did not deserve it.

Neither did I.

Nonetheless, Lawson caught my dad’s short, probing questions in stride. He hadn’t taken the first bite of penne when my dad asked, “So, Mr. Hill, what do you do for work?”

“Dad.” My hand fisted beside my plate.

If we were dating, which we weren’t, I would’ve grabbed his hand beneath the table. Not that he needed my support. Clearly, Lawson could handle his own. He’d done enough interviews, been asked a plethora of questions, some good, some painfully ignorant. He could take my dad. Could stand the heat.

Lawson set his fork down. Politely. After all, my dad was engaging him in conversation, regardless the line of questioning felt more like a police interrogation. “I write and record music,” he said.

“A Nashville musician? Lot of that around here. You perform this music you write and record?”

“Yes, sir. Sometimes.” Lawson bit into his pasta and his eyes flared. “Wow,” he said, stabbing another forkful, “this is really good, Mr. Evans. The char on the red peppers is perfect. I can never get mine like this. The skin always gets in the way and makes my sauce look, I don’t know, goopy or something.” He took another bite.

Dad's guard inched off its axis. He blinked a couple of times, wiped his mouth with his napkin. I hid my smile behind a piece of bread.

"Well, you, ah...you should put the peppers in a paper bag to steam after you pull them out of the oven. Helps loosen the skin."

"What? Seriously?" Lawson shook his head. "Brilliant."

*Wow, I thought, crisis and supreme humiliation at the hands of my father successfully averted.* But no. Dad wasn't finished.

"How did you meet my daughter?"

Lawson had a mouthful of bread, so I answered, "Savana. You remember Savana."

"Your library coworker," said Dad.

"Yep."

"She's a friend of yours?" he asked Lawson.

Lawson nodded. "Yes, sir. I met her shortly after I moved here. Her dad, he owns a lot of local businesses. Gave me a shot—a lot of shots, actually, at performing for his customers. Savvy and I hit it off pretty quickly. Guess you can say she was my first real friend in Nashville."

"Huh. Where are you originally from?"

"Louisiana."

"How old are you?"

"Dad." My face heated.

"What?" Dad's eyebrows shot up. "I'm just trying to get to know your friend here."

"You're interrogating him as if he's on a witness stand, not a guest at our dinner table."

"Speaking of which," said Dad, "did Harper tell you she's going to law school? At Cambridge?" There was such pride in his voice, the temperature on my anger dropped a fraction.

Still, this wasn't going well. I didn't know what was happening between Lawson and me, but I wanted more of him. More of his time, his stories, his passion for music, his passion for *life*. After tonight,



though, I'd be lucky if he didn't delete me from his phone. Pretend like none of this ever happened. File me away with all the other crazies he'd met and move on.

"Dad, please," I said. "Can't we just eat?"

"Harper, if you choose to date a man, to bring him home to meet me and sit at our table, he should know your intentions. He should know your goals."

Lawson choked, set down his fork and grabbed his water.

Humiliation replaced the blood in my veins. Suddenly, I was having an out-of-body experience. Watching from above as all my internal organs shut down, bones turned to yogurt, and I slid off my chair into a puddle on the floor.

"And she should know yours—I should know yours," Dad insisted. "Starting with why you want to date my daughter."

"*Starting* with?" I demanded, surprised I had the ability to speak. This was so not salvageable. If magic were real, if I was a badass Hogwarts graduate, I'd've laced my fingers with Lawson's and disappeared us both to safety.

Then watched through a veil of tears as he ran in the opposite direction.

"It's my job to look after you, Harper," said Dad.

"No, it's not. You don't have to—"

"I'm twenty-two."

My dad and I turned attention to Lawson, and I think both of us were surprised he was still there with a half-eaten plate of pasta, much less speaking up in the middle of our family argument.

"And, yes, I'm aware of Harper's acceptance into Cambridge and that she intends to go to law school." He smiled a half-smile that somehow put my anxiety to rest. His eyes met mine. "She's smart, confident, and I have no doubt she'll do well, no matter what she sets her mind to."

I smiled, too. "Thanks," I whispered.

He pulled in a breath, released it, slowly. “As for why I want to date her, well...”

Dad’s cell chose that exact moment to interrupt Lawson, mid-sentence.

NO! I wanted to scream. Wasn’t this exactly what always happened in pivotal moments? Rom-coms where a boy met the parents for the first time and a big revelation was about to happen in front of God and everyone and—

“Excuse me.” Dad rose from the table, retrieved his phone from its docking station. “Hello? Yes. This is he.” He left the room, murmuring in low tones.

“God, Lawson.” I felt faint, appetite lost. “I am so, so sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” His eyes were sincere. “To be honest, I’d’ve been surprised if he hadn’t given me the third degree. He is your father. Fathers are supposed to be protective of their daughters.”

“Yeah, but he’s not usually like this.”

“Usually? You bring a lot of guys home?”

My mouth opened and closed. “N-no, not at all, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Harper.” He took my hand in his beneath the table. He was so warm, and I wanted to curl into him, hold him and never let go. “Stop fretting, okay? I’m fine.”

“You’re not nervous?” I pressed his hand. “I’m nervous. I’m nervous as hell right now.”

“Of course, I’m nervous. But I’ve gotten so used to being nervous all the time, I’ve just kind of learned to embrace it.”

“There’s no way you’re nervous all the time. You always seem so...I don’t know...” I searched my mind for the right word, but my hand in his was muddying the pages of my mental dictionary. “Cool.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “Okay.”

“It’s true!”

“Well, I appreciate that, but really...always nervous before I go on stage, before and during an interview, meeting new people...”

I was shaking my head, mesmerized by him. His ease, his vulnerability. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Get up there and, like, not be a hundred and fifty percent nervous?”

“Columbus,” he said, brow furrowed, “were you not listening?”

“No, you said *before* you go on stage, but once you’re up there—”

“Nope. Still nervous. Whole show.”

“Really?”

“Really. When I first started,” he said, “I tried all these different methods, you know? To get over the jitters, so to speak. Nothing worked. And then a buddy of mine, Easton...You met him that night at The Shed. I asked him if he’d learned how to get past the nervousness, to just get up there, do what you gotta do, and get over yourself, right? And he said he once asked Vince Gill the same thing.”

“Wow.” Vince Gill, I knew. His was one of the few concerts I’d been to back in Ohio. “So...did you figure out the great mystery of killing stage fright?”

“Nope.” He looked at his plate, used his fork to push a pepper around a piece of penne. “Vince said to embrace the nervousness, because that means you care. So,” he said, his shoulders lifting, “that’s what I’ve done ever since.”

Silence.

After a few heartbeats, I whispered, “You’ve won Grammys, Lawson.”

He nodded, didn’t look up. “A few.”

Seven. He’d been presented with seven. Solo performance, record, album, music video. The last few years had been good to Lawson Hill, as far as accolades. And that wasn’t even counting all the other award shows he’d left with a full sweep. His acceptance speeches were always

humble, giving thanks to God, his mom, and to the team of people who made his dreams possible. He never faltered, never lost his element of surprise when his name was called. And his name had been called so many times I wondered if other artists automatically assumed that if Lawson was in their category, they didn't stand a chance. *Don't even bother reading the other nominees*, someone on YouTube had commented, *just give it to Lawson Hill*.

"*Write and record music*," I said, quoting him, "kind of undermines what you've accomplished, don't you think?"

He looked at me then. "Do you think it does?"

I stared into his eyes. His beautiful, bottomless eyes.

My heart began to beat hard again.

"I think there's a lot more to you than you want people to know," I said softly. "I also think that particular part of you has nothing to do with how many awards you've won or how many stadiums you've sold out."

We held each other's gazes for seconds. Breathing. Waiting. Silently replaying each moment we'd had together since the first night we met. At least, that's what *I* was doing. How could I not? Twenty-two years old and the man spoke as if he'd been around the world a hundred times, which he probably had, and experienced more than most would in a lifetime, which, I reminded myself, he probably had. I wasn't completely oblivious. I knew celebrities lived crazy-different lives than everyone else, that they hardly ever stopped, and one city blurred into the next and the next.

"Wanna know what I think?" he said, his thumb grazing my knuckles.

"Shoot."

By the way his brows rose, my succinct response must have surprised him. He took a breath, as though he needed to recompose. "I

think I wanna know a lot more about Harper Evans.” Another breath. His eyes fell to my lips. “If that’s okay.”

A sack full of butterflies opened up inside my chest. I licked my lips and he inhaled.

“It’s more than okay,” I said, after taking a breath of my own. Everything about us had felt like we were moving at warp speed, yet nothing in me wanted to pause longer than that single inhalation. “It’s —”

“Right?” He read my mind. Leaned toward me, nodded. “It’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I breathed as his fingers touched my cheek. “Yes, it is.”

“Harper?” Dad.

Lawson and I jerked apart, and I stood abruptly, almost sending my chair to the floor, which Lawson caught, because he’d apparently acclimated himself to my clumsiness.

My dad stood in the kitchen doorway, his face flushed, eyes skating from me to Lawson. Usually I could read his expressions, gauge his tone before he opened his mouth. But this one wasn’t just the typical overprotective father mentally counting the steps to his shotgun. There was something different. Something off. Something that had nothing to do with whether or not he saw me and Lawson almost kissing.

Holy crap, we’d almost kissed.

“Say goodnight to Mr. Hill,” Dad said, and there was a strange twisting in my chest. “We need to talk.”

## chapter nine

“SO YOU’RE GOING BACK to Columbus for...?”

I’d said goodnight to Lawson, promised I’d text him later, and followed my dad up the stairs to his room, where he grabbed a suitcase and started packing.

“A few days, possibly a couple of weeks. I don’t know.” He meticulously placed socks and boxers in one corner of the case. “I’ll keep you informed.”

“You’ll keep me informed?” I folded my arms across my chest. “Can we start with why you have to leave? Who was that on the phone?”

He shook his head. “Nobody. Just the, ah, school. The new teacher they hired for the position, they need me to show him the ropes, you know?”

“No. I don’t know. Why can’t another teacher do that? Or maybe the principal?”

“Beats me.” He pulled a couple of button-ups from the closet. “But I told them before I left that I’d help any way I could, if they needed me. I can’t back out.”

“What about your job here? I mean...” I handed him a couple of white tees from his top drawer. He never wore a dress shirt without one. “Isn’t that kind of irresponsible?”

He paused, glared at me. “Don’t talk to me about irresponsibility, young lady,” he said, incredulous, and my head popped back. It’s not that Dad never got firm with me, but he’d been on a roll all evening. With Lawson, with me. “We’re not finished talking about that boy you brought home tonight.”

There it was. The pasta I loved was settling bad in my stomach.

Dad continued rifling through his closet. “Without telling me, I might add. You don’t know him, don’t know his past, don’t know if he’s a rapist or a serial killer.”

“A serial killer? Really, Dad?” Shoving out a sigh, I gave in and found his spare pair of dress shoes, plucked his favorite tie from its revered place on top of the dresser. “You shouldn’t watch so much ID channel. It’s bad for the brain.”

“Hand me that belt, would you?”

So, this was the way it was going to be.

“Dad?” I said, folding a pair of his cotton sleep pants.

“Yeah?”

“You know Lawson’s not a bad guy. Right?”

“I can’t say I *do* know that, seeing as I’ve neither seen nor heard of him before this evening.” His hand hovered above the hanger of his black sport coat. “I also don’t know what you believe will come of spending any time with him,” he murmured and selected the navy jacket, instead. It was softer, less structured. I wondered why he was packing suit pieces, when he always wore slacks and polos. “You’re leaving and he’s clearly...well. I don’t know what he is.”

*Famous, Dad. He’s a superstar.* And yet he hadn’t uttered a word about his success at the dinner table. He didn’t have to. His kindness shone like a beacon. Lawson was probably the most talented person I’d ever met, yes, but kindness kicked talented’s ass in every competition. Funny, thoughtful. Generous and unassuming. There were a million things I could’ve said about Lawson to plead his case to my dad.

But I didn’t.

In the end, I kept my silence and helped Dad pack, buy a plane ticket online, and then I drove him to the airport.

“I was thinking maybe you could ask Savana to stay with you, while I’m gone?” he said as I pulled up to the curb.

His suggestion threw me a bit after the snide comment about bringing home a stranger without giving him notice. He’d met Savana, yes, but he didn’t know her. Ordinarily, I’d have put voice to such thoughts, but the unexpected rush of activity around us made for a serious *Squirrel!* moment. It was just past nine o’clock, dark, but the combination of airport and city lights gleamed and there were people everywhere, some arriving, some taking late flights like Dad.

“She seemed nice enough,” he said, “cheerful. You work together. You could *walk* to work together. Or drive, which I’d prefer, since you’ll have the car. Besides, I’m not sure I like the idea of you staying alone while I’m away.”

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t a bad idea. I liked Savana. She was fun, interesting. I liked who I was when I was around her. Plus, she’d introduced me to Lawson. “Maybe. But even if that doesn’t work out, I’ll be fine.”

He smiled in that universal Dad way. Head canted. Eyes sorrowful but proud. The one that told me he couldn’t believe we were here and that I was his adult daughter and that, yeah, I might be okay by myself for a few days.

“I know, sport.” He leaned over, kissed my forehead. “I’m so proud of you.” Pulling back, he whispered, “You know that?”

I nodded and he opened the door. “I’ll text when I get there.”

“Okay.”

“If you need anything, if anything comes up,” he said, collecting his luggage from the backseat, “let me know. Bills are paid. Fridge and cabinets are stocked.”

“Okay.”



“I left a debit card in my top drawer in case you need anything. Use it.”

“I will.” The conversation felt mechanical, rehearsed, though it was anything but. My dad was leaving, and I was in an unfamiliar city. He was going home. The home I knew, where I’d grown up, the home that would always be home to me. I didn’t know whether to be sad or jealous. Throw in the sense of confusion still lingering at the edges of my mind, and I had a large cup of emotional overkill.

I stayed put, watching him through the rearview as he walked around to the driver’s side. I knew he’d want to do his dad thing, hug me goodbye. And true to form, he didn’t disappoint. My feet had barely touched the pavement, the humid air snagging my breath, before he wrapped me in his arms and held on as if his flight wasn’t scheduled to board in less than an hour.

This time, I *did* open my mouth and said something, even gave him a little nudge. In response, he pulled me in closer, squeezing me tighter until I could literally count his heartbeats. Hugging me the way he used to.

After pressing his lips to the top of my head, then my temple, he waved me back inside the car and waited for me to buckle up. Snatched up the luggage resting against his leg, his gaze focused on the bustle on the other side of the windows.

“See ya, sport. Love you.” With an abrupt shove, he shut my door and made for the sliding glass doors.

He didn’t look back.

“Love you, too,” I whispered.

I didn’t listen to the radio on the way home. My brain was talkative enough, though, really, almost nothing since the abrupt ending of dinner made an ounce’s worth of sense.

Walking into the house—something I’d done plenty of times—didn’t help. If anything, the anxiety I usually left outside wrapped itself around me like an intruder. I closed my eyes, intent on calming myself. After

such a rollercoaster day, it stood to reason I'd be out of sorts. In fact, had I felt any less all over the place, I'd probably have real cause for worry.

Which was why I declared myself "fine," locked the door, climbed the stairs and headed straight for the shower; my favorite place of refuge when my thoughts haunted me. Twenty minutes later, I sat cross-legged in the center of my bed, dressed in my version of PJ's: a t-shirt and sleep shorts.

And then I called Lawson for the first time.

He answered on the second ring.

"Hi."

Something about hearing his voice pierced through the wall of peace I thought I'd built.

"Harper? Is everything okay?" His voice was full of concern and, unless I was mistaken, relief.

"Yeah." Shaking. I was shaking, eyes brimming with tears. "Yeah," I said again, "I'm good. My dad...he had to go back to Ohio for a few days."

"What? Why?"

I explained the whole new teacher thing and Dad's promise to help, if they needed him.

"Didn't you say he's a professor at the community college?"

"Full-time." I sighed, remembering the way he'd lashed back at me when I'd pointed out the irresponsibility of leaving without notice. I didn't doubt he'd call them. Make arrangements for another teacher to cover his classes. Still. It was out of character for my strict, punctual, you'd-better-be-barfing-up-a-lung-if-you-don't-show-up father. He was partially at fault for the firm standards I put on myself.

"Wow. I'm...I'm sorry, Harper. Are you okay? Sorry, I already asked you that."

A soft laugh. "You did, but thanks. Yeah, I'm okay. Just a little stunned. It was unexpected."

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Lawson said quietly, and I could imagine him sitting on his couch, a guitar in his lap. Bet he’d stopped playing when I’d called, so he could talk to me. “So, now you’re by yourself for...ever how long he’s away?”

“Looks like it.” I drew in a breath, tamped down the tide of emotion that came in the aftermath of shock. “Any ideas on what I can do to pass the time? Without Dad, I’m already looking at days, possibly weeks of pop tarts and fast food. Good for local business, bad for the waistband of my jeans.”

He laughed and then...silence. A moment passed. When he spoke, his voice had dropped a clear octave. “I have a few ideas. All of which include you being here with me.”

Just like that, we were back where we were only a handful of hours ago. Closer than two people who’d only recently met should probably be yet drawn together like magnets. Fighting the pull would’ve been a useless endeavor.

My heart expanded inside my chest, and I set a hand there, as if to contain it from bursting out and plopping on my comforter. “That’s... that’s an idea.”

I couldn’t believe what I was saying, what I was thinking.

“How about this,” he said as electricity skimmed over my skin, twirled around veins, “you pack a bag and I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Yes.

That was my thought. My *only* thought.

What was happening? The rational part of my brain screamed, *Sloooow your roll, Evans. You can’t just move in and play house with someone you’ve known for five seconds!* Because truth: it took longer to nurture a Ziploc bag of Amish Friendship Bread. But my heart, my swift-beating, swollen heart reasoned it was just for a few days. A sleepover that lingered longer than a single night. No big deal. We were grownups. Could make adult decisions.

I found myself nodding against the phone. “Okay,” I said. “I can do that.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m on my way. See you soon.”

I practically leapt from my bed, struggling to figure out my next move. Packing clothes to stay with the boy I liked turned out to be harder than Mr. Tipton’s sophomore advanced World Civics class. And that, by far, was the worst experience I had as a high school student. Learning the rights and obligations of citizenship in a hundred different countries, for me, was akin to standing in the plumbing aisle at Lowes while Dad tried to determine which size PVC fitting went with which PVC fitting.

By the time the doorbell rang, I’d jammed almost my entire closet and chest of drawers into the only suitcase I owned: a hot pink overnighter with flowers and hearts. Nothing screamed *going-to-grandma’s* more, which might’ve made sense if I’d had a grandma. As a girl on her way to Cambridge, however, it was just plain pathetic.

No doubt he heard my groan of frustration as I battled with running back to my room to dump at least half of what I’d packed. The guy hadn’t exactly asked me to move in with him, after all. One look at the 3-D effect of those daisies and hearts, thanks to my whole wardrobe bulging the fabric behind them, and I wouldn’t blame him for hightailing it back to his truck and leaving me in a cloud of dust. To lessen the chance, I decided to ditch the bag next to the stairs before heading to the door. At least that way, I wouldn’t have as far to drag it if he changed his mind.

As soon as I opened the door, I knew he hadn’t.

Lawson looked ridiculous-handsome in dark jeans and a heather gray t-shirt. He stood on my front doorstep, fingers jammed in the front pockets of his jeans, a smile on his face he tried to hold back by biting his lower lip.

“Wow, didn’t I just see you a few hours ago?” I said, feigning confusion.

“Did you?” His brow furrowed, but he was smiling in earnest, and my lungs were working overtime.

“Just couldn’t stay away.” I shook my head. “What am I gonna do with you?”

He shrugged, rocked back on his heels. “You really wanna go there? I have an expansive imagination.” As my cheeks pinkened, he said, “I think I’m detectin’ a southern accent weavin’ in with that Ohio, Columbus. You’d better watch out. Before long, you’ll be saying things like *tater salad* and *I’m fixin’ to go to the Walmart, y’all need anything?*”

I pressed my lips together. Set a hand to my hip. “Don’t bet on it, Louisiana boy. Come on inside. I’ve just gotta grab my toothbrush.”

He followed, but his hand on my arm stopped me before I could make for the bathroom and the small bag of toiletries I’d scrounged together.

Looking down at me, he said, “There’s something I need to take care of first,” and reeled me in, close.

Our bodies touched, and warmth bloomed in my belly. The air around us thickened. His eyes were soft, beautiful, and I wanted to drown in him, in his nearness, in his depth. I settled on breathing in the scent of his cologne.

“Thanks for rescuing me.” I looped my arms around his neck, which felt natural, right. “Not that I needed rescuing.”

“Didn’t you?” His breath wafted across my face as his hands held my waist.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Do you have a habit of rescuing girls with fathers who leave them?”

The edge of his mouth twitched. “I can’t even rescue myself half the time, Columbus. Wouldn’t bank on my ability to rescue anyone else.”

“But here you are,” I whispered in reply.

“Here I am.” His voice was such a soft, sexy timbre, my knees buckled a little.

“Lawson—”

“Can’t wait.” He released his hold on my waist to cup my cheeks between his palms. Traced my bottom lip with that same calloused thumb he used to make his beautiful music.

I stiffened at first. I didn’t know why I stiffened. It’d been a long time since I’d been kissed. Senior year, prom, and it wasn’t the greatest. Definitely not memorable.

But Lawson, damn, he knew how to kiss.

I melted into him. His lips brushed mine, warm, soft and the tension in my body relaxed. I needed this. Wanted it. I hadn’t realized how badly, until he pressed harder, parting my lips, and a small moan flitted from my mouth to his.

Lawson. *Lawson*. His tongue slid against mine, sweet and minty, as if he’d popped a piece of spearmint gum on the way over, then spit it out before knocking on my door. His hands were hot against my face, his lips a pair of expert craftsmen, retreating, kissing softly, exploring patiently, before returning to sink deeper.

My hands moved up his neck into his hair, soft and thick, just as I imagined. I pushed closer, until there wasn’t an inch of air between us. Opened my mouth wider, relishing his soft groans, his hands roaming along my shoulders and down my back. He was patient. Careful. *Reverent*—as if I were someone precious, someone he cherished, someone he trusted.

It took several incessant buzzes from his phone to break the spell. Still he lingered, swept his lips across mine once more, a gentle, tender kiss, before he pulled back. I opened my eyes. And thought I might cry. The emotion was overwhelming. His eyes were dark, his lips pink from our kiss.

*God* that was good.

Too good.

“Sorry,” he said, “I’ve gotta take this.” His watch winked in the light of the foyer as he lifted his phone to his ear and turned away. “Hey, man, what’s up?”

He was busy. I understood. That he came here to be with me, suggested I stay with him while Dad was gone, was nothing short of a true sign of his limitless generosity. It was no wonder everyone loved him, no surprise reporters often began questions with, *Now, you're known for how good you are to your fans...*

He was good to everyone. Including me. And we'd only just met.

And kissed.

I headed for the bathroom to grab my toiletry bag. After that kiss, there was no way I *couldn't* go with him, if he still wanted my company. His work would probably consume most of his attention, and I already knew I'd have to respect that and give him space whenever he needed it. I'd want the same respect for myself. Like Dad said, we needed to know each other's goals if we were going to be in a relationship.

Or friendship.

Or whatever this was. We needed to know.

Everything.

By the time I made it back to the foyer, Lawson was already off the phone, my suitcase in-hand, without a single snarky remark on its appearance or weight. This time, I wasn't greeted with his easygoing smile.

I hesitated on the last step. Stood still and let him take in my hastily dressed appearance with his eyes: My favorite Ohio State hoodie with the missing string, the black leggings I pulled on over my sleep shorts, and my black Converse—not as cool as his.

"We're doing this, yeah?" he said, unknowingly easing the last of my tension with words spoken as more of a given than a question.

Confidence restored, I moved toward him until the toes of our shoes nearly touched. "Yep. Just gotta lock up."

## chapter ten

BEING IN LAWSON'S home again shaved off another level of tension I had left over from Dad's departure. I'd been there once. Once. But the smells were already familiar. Leather, pine and Lawson's cologne. I inhaled deeply, filling myself with him.

The sound of Lawson's sneakers on the hardwood floors, the click of the door sealing us in. All of it felt cozy to me, safe. A gentle tugging at my soul. My gaze lifted to the shiny, framed records up the staircase and I sighed inwardly, smiled.

"So, the guest bedroom is across from mine. Hope that's okay."

I blew out a steady breath. We were doing this. A temporary situation, sure, but a sound decision, nonetheless.

"Of course." I found myself focused on his mouth. Remembering the kiss from earlier. Is this how it would be? Thinking about it every second, until it happened again, *if* it happened again? And if it did, which I desperately hoped it would, would it feel the same?

Gosh, he had a gorgeous mouth.

Following him upstairs was like moving inside a dream. Feet moving without touching, a surreal, is-this-really-happening transition from point A to point B.

Maybe I was tired.

Maybe I was overwhelmed.



Hasty decisions weren't my vibe. But I felt more comfortable with Lawson than I'd ever felt with anyone.

"Right here," he said, and I couldn't help but glance first at the door across the short expanse of hall. His door. His room beyond the door. Where he laid down, closed his eyes and slept. Where he undressed, showered—

"You have your own bathroom, fresh towels and toiletries, if you need them." In the guest room, he set my suitcase and laptop bag (thank goodness I'd remembered it *and* my charger) on a tufted settee at the foot of the bed.

I looked around, lips parted. Shocked yet telling myself I shouldn't be shocked, because what did I expect? A set of bunk beds and a tv with rabbit ears? Mattress on the floor and peeling wallpaper? *These* walls were a muted gray, the beamed ceilings white and vaulted like something inside a log cabin. Save for the large gray space rug covering most of the floor and several throw pillows, the room was white. White couch, white armchair, white lampshades, white bedsheets and curtains.

"No one's ever slept in this room." Lawson went to the elegant paned windows that spanned the entirety of one wall.

There were trees beyond, though hard to make out in the dark. Lawson's shoulders lifted and fell as he gazed outside. He folded his arms across his chest, fingers gripping his biceps.

I wanted to grip his biceps.

"I definitely won't be eating anything with ketchup in this room," I said. "Or chocolate."

He turned halfway to look at me, one eyebrow quirked. "We can always make an exception for chocolate."

Heat crept into my cheeks and I tugged at the hem of my hoody. Wished I'd thought to dress cuter, make an effort. But everything between me and Lawson felt effortless. Like I could be me, the real me, bummed out to the max, hair tossed up in a messy bun, and he was cool with that.

The way he looked at me told me he was more than cool with that.

“What are you thinking?” I asked softly.

He took a moment longer to stare before inhaling a shallow breath. “I already told you.”

Yes, he had.

I shrugged, toed off my shoes. Re-tied my bun. Busied myself to hide my nervousness. “I know you want to know more about me, but there’s not much more to tell. I’ve lived a pretty uneventful life.”

“That can’t be true.” He moved for the bed, sat down, half on, half off, one leg bent on the mattress, the other dangling off the side.

Lawson wasn’t a tall man, but this bed was monstrous. He looked like a model sitting there. Expensive jeans, expensive shirt, expensive hair and a smile that set off glittering fireworks in my stomach. How many women, I wondered, had been this close to him? Had seen him like this?

We were both fully clothed. Several feet apart. And yet the room felt steeped in intimacy.

*Doesn’t matter.* That’s what I told the voice of fear whispering inside my head. My father was gone. I had no one I knew here, save for Savana. Lawson suggested I stay with him. It wasn’t a big deal. And it didn’t matter what women were in his past.

I was the woman in his present.

The thought gave me the courage to join him on the bed. I sat on the opposite side, legs drawn in, Indian style. “Go ahead. Ask me questions. Something you didn’t find on Google.”

He laughed, rubbed his jaw. “I was wondering when that would come up.”

“Hey, I can’t say much. I did the same thing to you.”

“You and eleventy-billion other people.” His eyebrows pulled together, his eyes glistening. “It’s impossible to keep even an ounce’s worth of a private life anymore. I’m under a magnifying glass 24/7.”

The confession tugged at my heart. When we'd pulled into the drive, there were at least a dozen fans outside the gate. All female. All screaming at the top of their lungs the moment they realized it wasn't just Lawson's gardener or a friend paying a house call. It was Lawson himself.

Phones snapped. The gates began to open. Mack ordered everyone to move out of the way. More phones snapped, blinding flash after blinding flash capturing this glimpse of a moment.

The moment Lawson Hill was behind the wheel of a vehicle, in the act of going home like a normal human being.

"You might wanna..." he'd murmured calmly, and he didn't have to finish the sentence.

I'd ducked down, hidden my face inside my worn hoody. Stayed there like a turtle in its shell until I'd heard the gates click shut and the truck accelerating toward the house.

Now I was safe inside his fortress of white walls and gold records, and he was asking to get to know me. When I knew that he knew, because I *certainly* knew, and I doubted he was that dense, that it took way more than four months to truly know someone.

Nonetheless, I found myself telling him the truth.

"Some people, not all, but some people haven't led a spectacular life up until the point you finally meet them."

Concern etched his brow. "Your mother, she left when you were little."

The words scraped against the edges of my mind. I refused to allow them entry. "I don't remember her, if that's what you're asking."

"I don't know that I'm asking anything." His eyes softened and for a moment I marveled at how expressive he was for a man. Unlike most, he didn't shy from allowing his face to show emotion. "But everyone has a back-story, Columbus. I've told you mine, or, at least, given you the highlight reel."

“Quid pro quo, is that what this is?” I didn’t know why I was suddenly defensive. Did I care what he knew about me? No. Because there was nothing to tell. “You ask me to stay with you while my father’s away in exchange for information?”

A grin spread across his handsome face. I wished he wasn’t this good looking. Wished he didn’t have those eyes and those cheekbones and that smile. Wished I had no knowledge of how talented he was, how beautifully he sang. It would’ve made being irritable with him a whole lot easier.

“I might’ve asked, Columbus,” he said, “but you agreed.”

My stomach flipped. His cool confidence was a sanding block to my already frayed nerves.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and I tried not to feel disappointed. Tried to stop the plethora of questions going off in my mind when he looked at the screen and his shoulders slumped.

“I gotta take this. Sorry.” And he really did look sorry, eyebrows drawn, smile wilting at the corners of his mouth.

My heart—God, my heart was doing something strange in my chest. Beating hard, yes, but twisting, too, as if every emotion was swirling in and out of that one organ.

“Hey, Katie, can you hold on a second? I’ll just be a minute,” he answered all in one breath, then muted the phone. His gaze met mine. “Tell you what. Let’s watch a movie. You like movies?”

I nodded like a child. “Sure.”

“There’s a media room downstairs, near the rear of the house. Should be easy to find. There’s a small kitchen in there, a microwave, probably some microwave popcorn in the pantry. You like popcorn, right?”

Again, I nodded. I was already getting off the bed, because he was, and he still had someone on hold, and this was his house, not mine, and who was Katie?

“Set up any way you like, and I’ll be there in a few. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He clicked off mute and pushed the phone to his ear, exiting the room. “Hey, sorry. No, I’m not busy, it’s okay. Uh huh...”

That was that before his voice faded, indecipherable.

I checked my own phone. No texts from Dad, no calls. No news was good news, I guessed, and unzipped my overnight bag. Yoga tights and a hoody made for a comfy combo, a quick solution to dressing in haste and running away in the middle of the night with a boy I barely knew. But this was Nashville and we were still in the middle of the summer. I at least needed a tank top, maybe a pair of shorts. Then again, I didn’t want to show too much skin. Didn’t wanna be *that* girl, trying way too hard.

“Who. Freaking. Cares, Evans?” I said to one of the white throw pillows on the bed. Because, really. We weren’t anything, Lawson and me. Friends, lovers, next door neighbors. We were acquaintances, and acquaintances didn’t care two bits what the other was wearing.

“But do acquaintances kiss?” The self-imposed question, whispered into the vast room, put a smile on my face and a tug in my belly.

The Kiss. The kiss the kiss the kiss the kiss. He could kiss. *Man*, could he kiss. I hoped I hoped I hoped—I hoped with every ounce of girly, lash-batting, wishful, cotton candy fluffiness inside of me that he was as enamored over our kiss as I was. Going a single minute without thinking of it was impossible. His lips, his breaths, his hands on my face, on my body.

Phantom fingertips whispered down my spine and my heart kicked into second gear. Little licks of pleasure swept around my legs. My nipples hardened. There—I felt his touch there. Gentle. Then not so gentle. Demanding. A beautiful, sweet pressure built between my thighs as I replayed our kiss on a film reel, over and over. I wanted more. Burned for it. For him.

I had to get a grip.

Opting for a gray tank, I kept my bra on and my yoga pants and set to the mission of finding the room Lawson had spoken of.

His house was ridiculous-big, but Lawson was true to his word. I found the place without getting lost or, since my dad thought Lawson was a serial killer, opening a closet full of dead bodies.

A large sectional commanded the room, overstuffed and inviting with cup holders and folded blankets. Built into the main wall was a television. Beneath the tv stretched a linear fireplace, unburning, of course, but I wondered what it would feel like in winter. If Lawson liked to light it up, sit back and relax. If *relax* was even in his vocabulary. Rubbing my upper arms, I moved for the apartment-sized kitchen, found the popcorn packets, as well as a host of other boxes of candy. Raisinets, Milk Duds and, my favorite: Starburst. The good kind, too, with tropical flavors like mango and pineapple.

I was in the middle of unwrapping the second fruit-flavored candy, watching the digital seconds tick down on the microwave, when a pair of arms wrapped around me from behind.

Startled, I spun around, backed up so fast I might've toppled over if not for my butt smacking the counter. Grace was not my middle name.

Lawson showed me his hands. Bemusement lit his eyes. "I should've asked first."

"N-no." I swept a lock behind my ear. "You don't have to...I mean, I was just, you know..." I presented the open pack of Starburst.

"Protecting your candy? Hey, I get it." He moved closer. "Strange place, strange person."

"You're not strange."

"No?" He set a fist to the counter beside my hip. I could've counted the flecks of silver in his blue eyes. "You don't feel strange to me, either, Columbus. Reckon that's a good thing?" His eyes searched mine.

The air thickened around us. In all my life, I'd never been more aware of my own body. Of blood and veins and organs. Of racing pulses

and heady sensations running marathons around my thighs and, oh my dear God, weaving figure eights in between them.

I should've looked away. I was supposed to, but I didn't and neither did he.

Fisting his shirt, I pulled him in, and I kissed him.

He made a sound—surprise, relief, I didn't know—and buried a hand in my hair. His other hand squeezed my hip and fire tore through me. I fell into him. Clutched his arms. Pressed my body into his. The want I had for him was almost indescribable. A deep hunger, demanding, raw and gnashing. As if I'd been starved for weeks and had finally been presented with a glorious feast.

Had I been attracted to other guys before? Absolutely. Not hundreds, no. Not even a dozen, but enough. However, none had affected me like Lawson Hill. Not one of those boys, who, indeed, all seemed like boys by comparison, had made me feel like he did. Like I was losing control and it was the most wonderful thing ever.

"I've never moved, until now," I said on a gasp for air.

He stared at me, blinking.

"All my life," I said, "I've stayed in the same school system, grew up with the same people, ate and shopped at the same places."

*Until now. Until you.*

The words hung in the nonexistent space between us, unspoken, nevertheless understood.

"Do I have memories?" I rose to kiss him again and he swept in, meeting me more than halfway. His lips were molten butter, his tongue seeking mine in an instinctual dance.

When he released my mouth, I set a palm to his chest, treasuring the sensation of his heart: a bass drum thump-thump-thumping. "Of course, I do. But they're simple. Sweet reflections of holidays, school events and cozy winter evenings roasting marshmallows in our fireplace."

His mouth kicked up at the corner. "That sounds really nice."

"It is. It was."

His smile wilted a little. "My memories are limited."

I frowned. "You don't owe me your past, Lawson."

"No, I..." His hands skated down my arms, and then his hands were grasping my hands and, damn, he was so warm. My heart was screaming, my body humming with need. "I want you to know. Want you to know more about...about me. If you want to."

I nodded. "Maybe we should sit down?"

He glanced at the microwave, the couch, then at me. "What about the movie? I've got a great collection."

"You can be my movie tonight."

His grin lit up the entire room. "I'll grab the popcorn."

"SO, LIMITED MEMORIES?" I prompted as we settled on the couch, facing each other.

Lawson set the bowl of popcorn between us, uncapped two bottles of water and handed one to me. "Yeah, I don't know. Sometimes I think I've just blocked the stuff out I don't want to think about." He took a pull from his own bottle. "Then again, I'm sure everybody does that. It's hard for me to put into perspective, but music is like comfort food for me. Does that make sense?"

"Kind of."

"Do you feel that way about anything?"

"You mean, like, a passion?"

"Sure." He juggled a few popcorn kernels in his hand, then popped two in his mouth. Man, he even chewed sexy and chewing was one of the most disgusting acts, if you thought about the mechanics of it. "Something you love. Something that's all yours."

I shrugged. "Not really. Reading, I guess? I love to read. Oh, and eighties movies."

"Eighties movies?" He smiled and my heart ballooned. "Really?"

"Totally my jam."



“Which one’s your favorite?”

“Ooh.” I blew out a sigh, thinking. “That’s a toughie. *The Lost Boys*, maybe? But *The Goonies* is awesome, too, and *Ghostbusters*.”

“Great soundtracks.”

“Really great soundtracks.”

Another drink of water and he capped the bottle, plunked it in the nearest cupholder. He rubbed his hands together. “Okay, so, you’ve gotta feel something unique when you read a book that really grabs you, right? Or when you watch one of the movies you’ve seen a million times but never gets old?”

“Comfort.” It was the first word that popped in my head. “They soothe me, no matter what kind of day I’ve had, good or bad.”

He was nodding. “That’s what music is for me. It soothes my soul like nothing else can.”

I thought about the bad days I’d had, which, luckily for me, were few and far between compared to others. Without a mom, I didn’t have the mom-comfort most of my friends had been blessed with. The trip-and-fall, skinned my knees on the pavement outside, followed by gentle nursing from mama, a kiss on the forehead and pancakes for dinner. Dad was great. The best, better than I could’ve ever asked for. But he was still a dad. A man. His maternal skills only ran so deep.

Books played that role for me. And, yes, eighties movies, sometimes nineties, if Freddie Prinze, Jr. was involved.

“That...makes a lot of sense,” I said. Music held a deep place in my heart, too. Maybe not on the same level as it did for Lawson, but there’d been a few artists over the years that’d gotten me through some rough patches.

How incredible, that Lawson’s music had doubtless done the same for millions of people. People who needed hope, when they had none. Love, when love seemed too far out of reach.

A slow inhale, followed by an even slower exhale, and he said, “But then there’s you.”

I stopped breathing. Felt my eyes widen as they held his.

“I’ve been locked up in the studio for so long,” he said, “just me and like two of my band members in a constant vacuum of creativity, and you...you come along and it feels like freedom. Like I’ve just stepped out of jail, and I don’t understand it, Harper. You know? I don’t understand it.”

“Neither do I.” I was in a haze, captivated, my voice no more than a whisper.

“Making music is what I know. Recording, touring, press-releases, moving from one city to the next over and over again. I’ve had chapters of, ‘okay, now what? What’s next?’ instead of allowing myself to breathe. And with you...” He raked a hand through his hair, held the back of his neck. “It’s like I’m breathing for the first time.”

## chapter eleven

PREPARATION CAME EASILY for me. Tests, essays, projects, chores at home. Even if the task was initially overwhelming, I found a way. Worked out steps that led to a solution and, ultimately, completion and moving on to the next thing. It's what would make me a good lawyer one day, Dad had once said, and I'd had no reason to disagree.

But this.

Lawson.

Telling me with all the believable conviction of a man on his knees, begging for his life, that somehow, somehow, I inspired him. I didn't know what to do with it.

It was like he'd given me the crown jewels. *Here you go, thought you might like these.* And I was too taken aback to speak. To utter words that made sense enough to stick, when his words—his beautiful, vulnerable words had carved their way under my skin.

Into my heart.

I set a hand to my chest to make sure it was still there. How could a boy feel this deep? It was inconceivable and, yet, there he sat across from me. Barefoot, legs folded like a normal person who said normal things instead of stuff like *I'm breathing for the first time.*

"I don't crave attention," he said. "People probably think I do—how can they not? I've had a lucky ride on this train. But, no, it's not attention

I crave. It's connection."

He reached for my hand and I gave it to him without hesitation.

"I do most of my songwriting by myself," he said. "If a song needs a producer, sure, I bring someone in, but for the most part, it's a lonely business. A solitary way of life."

"That sounds..."

"Sad?" He laughed.

"No, not sad. Typical, maybe."

His eyebrows arched.

"Of an artist, I mean. Think of all the writers out there, plugging away at a novel for months, sometimes years. It took Margaret Mitchell...what? Ten years to write *Gone with the Wind*? And that's one of my favorite stories."

"‘Tomorrow is another day,’ right?" He grinned.

"Not my favorite Scarlett O'Hara line, but it'll do."

"Okay, then, what's your favorite line?"

I sat up straighter, lifted my chin. "‘Death, taxes and childbirth! There's never any convenient time for any of them!’"

He leaned his head back and laughed. He was still holding my hand. I loved that he was still holding my hand.

"Definitely a better quote," he said.

"So, your sad, solitary way of life," I said, and he laughed. That I could make him laugh—I loved that, too. "Is it really all that bad? I mean, look at you. You're Lawson-freaking-Hill. That's gotta feel pretty great."

He shook his head. "I use work as a coping mechanism. Not so great."

"A lot of people do that."

"But it's easy to blur the lines, for my work to equal my worth." His expression softened. The vulnerability was back, real and raw and paving roads in my heart. "That's been my biggest struggle. Trying to separate work from who I am and what I want. That's why the moments

I've had with you, few as they may be, are so valuable to me. No one's taken the time to get to know me the way you have. Not Lawson Hill the brand. Just...Lawson Hill the human, the person." He swallowed "The man."

My throat dried out and when I tried to speak, my words escaped as if I was auditioning to play Marilyn Monroe. "We've known each other for like five seconds."

His charming half-smile lit fires beneath my skin. "Six." He pressed my hand, then let go.

I took a drink of water, eyeing him down the ridges of the plastic bottle. He was waiting for me to respond. Unashamed. Unworried whether or not he'd confessed too little or too much. Comfortable with his own words, who he was, and, apparently, who I was to him.

"If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?"

I didn't know why I asked the question. It felt generic and yet I wanted to know. He was perfect. To me, to anyone with a eyes and ears. But he was opening up to me, willingly, wanting to give me what I didn't ask for and what I certainly didn't deserve.

He didn't hesitate. "I'd undo my severe case of comparison syndrome."

Now, that, I did not expect. "It's that bad? Really?"

"Chronic. Seriously, though, that's what I'd do. I'd stop comparing myself to everyone else. I'd stop wondering if my music should sound like theirs, when I know, without a shadow of a doubt, my music shouldn't sound like anyone else's but mine. And yet I fall for it every time a new song passes one of mine on the charts or...am I good enough?"

I set my empty water bottle in a cupholder, reached back and redid my bun.

Lawson watched my movements, his gaze skating up my arms to my head and back down again. "You think I'm nuts, don't you?" There wasn't a hint of humor in his tone.

“Certifiable.” I kept my features schooled. “In fact,” I said, pushing my hands in my lap, “I think I might ring the nearest sanitarium. It’s a straitjacket and a padded room for you, buddy.”

His eyes danced.

“How can you not feel like your enough? You’re incredible, talented, handsome as all get-out, kind...” I was going too far, revealing too much. This couldn’t happen. I shouldn’t have let it. I was leaving. And he was a constellation in the sky. Beautiful, inspiring and so far out of reach.

But I couldn’t seem to stop myself. “People, when they go to your shows, they sing your songs back to you, Lawson. I’ve watched them. I mean, of course not in person yet, but I’ve seen the videos. The crowds, they love you, and they know your work. They connect with it—with you. Everything you create is good enough. It’s you making music, lyrics. Every single line, every single note is authentically yours. How can it not be good enough? How can *you* not be good enough?”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re pretty good at pep talks?” Some smiles were just a smile, mouth turned up to express happiness or amusement. But not Lawson’s smile. Lawson’s ignited his entire face. There were no in-betweens, no levels of charm versus elated. His smile was his smile, and a rush of excitement zoomed through me every time I bore witness to it.

“If the lawyer thing ever goes sideways,” he said, “you could always think about going into therapy or psychiatry.”

“I don’t think anyone wants me inside their head for too long.” I pinched the cuff of his jeans. “Besides, I’m not really all that good at pep talks. Just telling truths. And maybe attempting to add humor to heavy conversations.”

His lips twisted to one side. “This is pretty heavy, isn’t it?”

Needing to do something with my hands, I grabbed another handful of popcorn. “I think maybe you’re just a heavy kind of guy.”

He cocked his head to the side.

“Am I right?”

Sighing, he looked down at his hands. “You’re not wrong.” He was silent for seconds before his gaze found mine again. “I think I was born to feel things heavily. To make music and turn those feelings into songs for the world around me. To connect with strangers because I’ve put those feelings out there.”

“And this girl you were with for three years...”

He pulled in a breath. Held it.

“She inspired a lot of these feelings. Didn’t she?”

Several heartbeats passed before he answered. “There’s a quote I have on the fret board of one of my acoustic guitars. It says, ‘Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.’”

“William Wordsworth.”

“I’ve never forced songwriting. It’s always been something that just sort of flowed out of me. And, yeah, sure. Maybe she did inspire lyrics, music, but so did a lot of other people, events...” He paused. “Life changes.”

“Of which there have been many, I gather. People.”

“Truthfully? No. People have come and gone from my life, of course they have, but the nature of this business involves a lot of moving parts.”

“Maybe that’s the problem.”

He stared at me curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe you need to eliminate all the moving parts and get back to when it was just you and the page. Or you and an instrument, since you play, like, twelve thousand.”

We laughed and the sound was beautiful, filling, a comforting completion.

“You meet and lose people, then write songs about it. The good, the bad, the overwhelmingly fantastic, the unbearable.” I shrugged. “Taylor Swift isn’t the only one who does that, regardless she seems to be the poster child for it.”

“Indeed, she is. God love her.”

“Bless her heart.” The words, so common in the South, still felt foreign on my tongue.

“Her *whole* heart.” Lawson moved the popcorn bowl to the floor. A thrill zoomed through me as he reached for and took my hands in his again. I hoped he didn’t notice mine were shaking. Hoped he didn’t catch the hitch in my breath or the loudness of my heartbeat.

“I do meet and lose people,” he said, “but so does everyone. I don’t have a lot of friends. Acquaintances, yes, but people who are close to me?” He shook his head. “I don’t go through the wrong friends to find the right ones.” His tongue darted out to moisten his lower lip. “And I don’t go through lovers in attempt to find my forever girl.”

My death was imminent. Stroke, heart attack, keeling over from extreme emotion. Was that possible? Maybe. I’d seen footage of fans fainting at concerts. Girls crying so hard and sweating, they just passed out on the spot. Was that what was happening? Was I fangirling over Lawson Hill? The small voice in the back of my mind said *no*. That’s not at all what this was. It was deeper, stronger. Fuller.

“You’re horribly romantic, you know that?” I said, and it was true. Men like Lawson were reserved for novels and rom coms. They weren’t like this in real life.

Except maybe they were.

Or maybe Lawson was the last one alive.

“I am,” he admitted. “Can’t help it. Mama raised me to open doors, stay street-side if I’m walking with a woman, take out the trash, do the dishes, fold the laundry, cook—”

“Damn, Hill, you’re just straight husband material, aren’t you?”

“Some might say.”

“Only some?”

He pumped his shoulders. “Let’s watch a movie, yeah?” He moved for the remote and I wondered what I’d said, why he’d shifted the conversation. “Do you work tomorrow? I’m happy to be the one responsible for keeping you up late, but...” He clicked on the television



and scanned through several apps. “I know managers can get more than a little strict over punctuality.”

“That, they can. But tomorrow’s Saturday and I have weekends off.”

“Ah, so, you’re stuck here with me.” He put an arm around my shoulders, and I moved closer, pulled my legs up on the couch. I couldn’t imagine this ever getting old. Us sitting together, his chest rising and falling against my arm, his breath on my face, stirring my hair.

We watched *This Means War* with Reese Witherspoon, Chris Pine and Tom Hardy. Lawson laughed when I insisted Reese’s character, Lauren, should’ve ended up with Tuck, Tom Hardy’s character.

“That wouldn’t have made sense,” he said. “Tuck was supposed to end up with his ex. They had a family.”

“But Lauren’s the main character, and Tuck has a British accent.”

Lawson laughed harder. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything!”

“Uh huh. And if I had a British accent?” His eyes glistened with humor as they scanned my face.

“Honestly? You would not be safe.”

This time, he was the one who pulled me in. We were a perfect fit, Lawson and me. He felt perfect. The weight of him, our mouths moving in flawless synchronization, tongues sliding softly. Perfection. I’d never wanted anyone like I wanted him. Never felt a burn so intense, a growing, simmering spark that made me greedy for more.

His fingers slipped beneath my bra strap and I trembled. Gooseflesh peppered my skin. His mouth left mine. Slowly, so slowly I thought I might die, he slid the material off, baring my shoulder. Then his breath was there, hot and intense, followed by his lips. He branded me, replaced the slip of uncovered space with kiss after kiss after kiss. I let go of a small cry, half surprised, half consumed by want.

“God, Harper, you’re so soft.” He trailed his thumb over my collarbone. Opened his mouth on my neck. “And you taste...”

His hand was in my hair and I was about to lose my mind. Pleasure rocketed through my body at the feel of him beneath my hands, the movement of his muscles, the heat of his skin beneath his clothes.

“Like an amen.”

The words caught me by surprise. He must’ve felt the shift, because he drew back, his eyes boring into mine. They were dark, beautiful. Swollen with desire.

“An amen?” I felt my lips tip a little. “That’s new.”

“Yeah, you know, what you say at the end of a prayer or a hymn or —”

“I know what an amen is.”

He grinned. “It also means ‘so be it.’”

“I still don’t under—”

“I’ve had a gap, Harper. A broad gap. This chasm of not knowing when or why or to what purpose or end or if either of those even exist. But then there’s you.” He swabbed my lower lip with the pad of his thumb, his eyes following the movement. “When I saw you that night for the first time, when Savana introduced us, it was like standing smack-dab in the middle of that chasm, where I’d been forever, and then looking to the other side, where there was flat, viable land, and there you were.” He swallowed and added softly, “There you were. Waiting for me. An amen at the end of the chaos.”

His gaze met mine and my lips parted.

“That may sound ridiculous,” he said, “but I don’t...I don’t know any other way to explain it.”

“I think you said it perfectly.”

He leaned forward, his lips seeking mine for another kiss, but my phone vibrated from where I’d placed it on the cushion behind me. His mouth hovered close to mine and he smiled the wide smile that made my stomach buzz like I’d swallowed a gazillion honeybees.

“You need to get that?” His breath. I wanted to feel it all over my body, not just my face.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m running to the restroom.” He rose from the couch and I tried to hide my disappointment. I didn’t want the moment to end. “Need anything while I’m up?”

I shook my head. “All good.”

The text was from my dad. *Made it in. Hope all is good. Love you.*

I typed that I loved him, too, and that, yes, everything was ~~perfect~~ great fine. Fine was an acceptable answer.

He sent back a thumbs up and I contemplated telling him the truth. That I was at Lawson’s. That I realized he didn’t like Lawson, but Lawson was a good guy and I deserved to have some fun, do my own thing, before an airplane swept me overseas and a college schedule became my new best friend. I deserved this. Rules, grades, GPAs, college applications. The proverbial checklist never ended.

But with Lawson, there was no checklist. No obligations. No sense of time or that I should be there instead of here or studying instead of chilling in front of a television.

Freedom. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt a freedom I hadn’t known existed. A sense that I was doing this for me and me alone. Giving my time and energy to a boy who looked like an angel and sang like one, too.

I didn’t tell Dad. Couldn’t for fear his reaction would ruin the feelings I wasn’t ready to let go of.

Lawson returned with two more bottles of water and a large, fluffy blanket. “Up for another?”

“Sure.”

He picked a Tarantino film and I snuggled beneath his arm, laid a hand to his chest. “Too bad it’s too hot for a fire.” He covered us both with the blanket. “This room’s pretty awesome with the grate burning.”

“This room’s pretty awesome, anyway.” I yawned. When did I get so tired? “I used to beg my dad to turn the air conditioner way down in the summer, just so we could have a fire.”

“Seems plausible.”

“Murder on a light bill, but...” I yawned again. “Yeah.”

He kissed the top of my head, stroked my hair. I thought I heard him murmur, “I need you,” but my eyes were closing too fast to be sure.

I WOKE with a start. Lawson was gone. I was alone, lying on the couch, snuggled comfortably beneath the blanket.

Music flowed from somewhere in the house. A piano. Lone, beautiful, chilling. The music room, I gathered, and checked my phone. 2:12 AM.

“Guess someone couldn’t sleep.” Sitting up, I yawned and stretched. Blinked my surroundings into focus. Soft, overhead lighting bathed the room in amber and I wondered if he’d fallen asleep, too. If we’d slept together. The television was off. I’d received no more texts from my dad.

I decided to follow the music. Regardless I didn’t know my way around the house. Regardless he may not have wanted to be disturbed. Artists needed their space. *People* needed their space. But I couldn’t stop myself. Couldn’t suppress curiosity when it begged to be fed. I found him easily, exactly where I thought he’d be, parked in front of his piano.

Candles burned, two on top of the baby grand, another on a nearby table.

His fingers moved effortlessly across the keys. Like the night we met, he was humming. Every few bars, he’d murmur lyrics. Lyrics I couldn’t understand but that nonetheless wove their way around my heart.

I leaned on the doorframe, loath to break the spell. In the midst of a master musician’s process, I was a voyeur, perhaps. Peeking in through a slat of boarded up window.

Watching Lawson was special. New yet strangely old, as if I’d been watching him my whole life. From a distance, maybe, but he’d always been there. A sanctuary in the dark, a miracle I hadn’t realized I needed. He was wearing glasses. I didn’t even know he wore glasses. Barefoot, he

used the brushed gold pedals to carry out the notes he played, notes that blended like I imagined fine whiskey would.

Arms folded over my chest, I set my head against the white-paneled frame and shut my eyes. I listened. I felt. Felt his perfect voice flow through me, felt the cleansing warmth of his music. It wasn't until I heard him murmur my name and the music stopped that I snapped to, straightened.

His smile was soft. He outstretched a hand. "Come here."

Cheeks burning, I did as he asked, took his hand. "Sorry for eavesdropping." I sat down beside him, swallowing when our thighs touched, pressed against each other.

He played a chord. "Sorry for waking you. Did I?" His eyes found mine.

"No. Well...yes. But it's okay." I broke his gaze—it was much too arresting for two o'clock in the morning—and surveyed the row of black and white keys. "What are you working on?"

"Something new." Another chord, another beautiful riff.

"That's...that's wonderful. Right?"

"It's a start." His fingers touched my face and suddenly our eyes were connected again, magnets unable to resist the inevitable. "It's a really good start."

## chapter twelve

WE STAYED UP for a while. Talking, laughing, kissing. Mostly, I listened as he played. New music, old music, and some he'd made up on the fly. I accused him of being more wizard than human, and he laughed.

Then he kissed me again.

We were really good at kissing.

Finally, I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer and I laid my head on his shoulder. He suggested we go to bed, followed by an explanation that he didn't mean for us to go to bed together.

It was really cute. Especially when he blushed.

Too bad, I thought, as we walked upstairs side by side, said goodnight and turned in opposite directions. Even if we didn't have sex, which I couldn't lie and say I hadn't thought of at least nine hundred times, we could've held each other. I couldn't think of anything more wonderful than waking up in this man's arms.

But I slept great. Better than I had in a long time, which was crazy. I hadn't realized I'd been losing sleep. Throwing on my hoodie and a pair of knee socks, I texted Dad that I loved him.

He called me immediately after.

"Hey, Dad, good morning."

"Morning, sport. Everything okay there?"

“Yeah.” I hated lying to him. Then again, I wasn’t really lying, was I? Everything *was* okay. More than okay, it was freaking great. “How’s Ohio?”

“Good, good. Got some things to do today. Just wanted to hear your voice.”

That choked me up a little. Dad and I hadn’t ever spent any time apart, not really, and I wondered what it would be like when I was gone for months at a time, deeply submerged in classes. “I love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too. Have fun, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

“See ya.”

He hung up, and I hooked my phone to its charger and set it on the nightstand. Coffee. I needed coffee. Maybe coffee outside or by one of those grand windows I noticed at the front of the house.

Lawson’s door was still closed, so I headed downstairs, careful to be quiet. A waft of bacon and something sweet hit my nose. My mouth watered. Was he already up? I walked faster, allowed my nose to lead me to the kitchen, where, sure enough, a woman stood beside the stovetop, whisking a bowl.

I paused halfway, watching her. Straight brunette hair cut to her shoulders, makeup done, she wore a floral apron and a pair of reading glasses. She was also humming. Whipping what I assumed were eggs. My heart did a strange thud inside my chest and I set a hand to my belly.

“You just gonna stand there gawkin’, darlin’?”

I jumped. Let out a squeak that was more mouse than human.

“Or are you gonna come help?” Her eyes met mine and she cocked an eyebrow, smiled.

“I’m Harper.” I approached the other side of the bar. “Harper Evans.”

“Uh huh, I’ve heard.” She stopped stirring, quickly dusted her hand off on her hip and offered it to me. “Darlene Hill.”

Lawson’s mother. The resemblance was there in her eyes, in the way they squinted at the edges when she smiled. I shook her hand. “Nice to

meet you Mrs. Hill.”

“Please, doll.” She went back to whisking. “Call me Darlene. Better to be on a first name basis, anyway, the way Lawson talks about you. Good lord, that boy.” She shook her head. “He’s somethin’ else.”

Yes. Yes, he was. He’d talked about me. To his mother. And she wasn’t freaking out like Dad did at dinner. At least not yet.

“You mind checkin’ on the biscuits?” She kicked her head toward the oven. “They should be about done. Those boys, they love their biscuits.”

“Boys?” I peeked in the oven, which did nothing for my already-rumbling belly. Homemade biscuits rose on a cookie sheet. Beautiful and perfect and looking like something out of a food magazine in a grocery store checkout line.

“Law’s band. Didn’t he tell you? They’re comin’ over this mornin’ for a photo shoot. These awards shows always gotta do a few photos, ‘specially if you’re performin’.”

“Lawson’s performing at an awards show?”

“Uh huh.” Her gaze lifted. “Hey, baby, why didn’t you tell her you were performin’ here soon?”

I looked and there he was. Lawson. Looking rested and too effing handsome in a pair of jeans and a white Henley. He rubbed the back of his neck, flashed a lopsided smile. His hair was damp from a recent shower.

His mom was still talking. “She stays the night but doesn’t know the first thing ‘bout your schedule? Boy.” She tutted, poured the egg mixture into a buttered skillet. “You’d think you’d learn, but nooo.”

“Mama, really.” His eyes found mine. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah.” I could feel my cheeks getting redder and redder the longer he looked at me. “Really good, actually. Thanks.”

He jammed his fingers in his front pockets. “Cool.”

“You?”

“Yep. Good.”



“Great.”

“Any trouble finding anything?”

“Nope. All good, thanks.”

“Cool.”

Darlene exhaled. “For heaven’s sake, you two. You’re like a couple of third graders. Law, pull us out some plates, would you? Harper, honey, you know how to cook eggs?”

Her ease with me, the southern endearments. I didn’t know what I expected when I met Lawson’s mother, if I ever met her at all, but this was definitely not a part of the image. “Yes, I think so.”

“Good. You tend to these.” She handed me a spatula at the same time the doorbell rang. “Yep. That’d be company. Don’t over-salt ‘em, okay, honey? Maybe a little more than you’re used to. Law, baby, show her.” She took off her apron and left, humming.

“Wow,” I said as Lawson retrieved a shaker of seasoning from the spice rack. “She’s kind of great.”

“I know, right?” He moved beside me, nudged his arm against mine. “Morning,” he said, gazing down at me. “Have I told you yet how glad I am you’re here?”

“Once or twice.” *And in between kisses*, I thought, remembering his lips on mine, his hands on my face, in my hair, clutching my waist and thighs.

I didn’t know kissing could be like that. Not that I had anything close for comparison, except for late night movies and romance novels. Kissing before, with anyone from my past, had been awkward, either too dry or with too much tongue.

With Lawson, it was crazy, but I felt like I didn’t have a past. Like past didn’t exist. The me before I was me right then, with him, was only a series of snapshots. Photos of moments leading up to the beginning of a really good movie.

Now, the movie was flying, full on, a big screen extravaganza with unbelievable moment after unbelievable moment.

“Hey, you’re gonna wanna stir those eggs around a bit, Columbus.”

“Oh!” I blinked rapidly. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Don’t sweat it. Here, let me.” I handed him the spatula and he expertly began fluffing the eggs. “No real art to it, just consistency.” His gaze dropped down my body. “You look comfortable.”

I tugged at the hem of my hoodie, wishing I’d thought to shower and dress beforehand. I hadn’t even glanced in the mirror. “Sorry, I...”  
*Sound completely lame and uneducated.*

“No apologies.” He kissed my forehead. “I like you comfortable. In fact...” He turned off the burner, bent and kissed my cheeks, one followed by the other. “I prefer you dressed down.”

The tiny hairs at my nape stood on end. “Yeah?”

“Mmhm.” He nuzzled my neck. His hands slid beneath my hoodie, his fingers snaking beneath my tank top, seeking and finding skin. “What’s this? Goosebumps?”

I murmured a *please* and a *don’t stop* that sounded too breathless to make sense.

“Wow, Columbus, do I give you goosebumps?” His thumbs were drawing circles on my skin, his fingers kneading, pulling me closer.

“Don’t get cocky,” I said to his Cheshire grin.

“Wanna run that by me again?” Our bodies fit perfectly, and I could feel him, hard and pressed tight against where I ached for him. His head sank down to mine.

“I said...” Our lips brushed and mine parted for him as if they had no choice.

The response, if I had a response, died. Our tongues met and that was it. I was shuddering, wanting, needing him. Fisting his shirt, rising against him. God, I was wet, and the friction was delicious. But it wasn’t enough. I wanted more.

I wanted everything.

“Okay, boys and girls.” A man’s deep, southern drawl poured a bucket of ice water down on top of us, and we sprung apart. “Some of

us haven't eaten yet."

"Hey, hey, Ritchie, what's up man?" Lawson was rounding the corner and shaking the man's hand as if nothing happened. As if we hadn't been caught climbing each other by not one, not two, but five grown men walking into the kitchen.

"Sup, brother?" The man, Ritchie, hugged Lawson, clapped him on the back. "You been writin'?"

"Little bit."

"Well, that's good. Figured you couldn't stay down for long." He kicked his head toward me. "Wanna introduce us?"

The other men drew closer, eyeing me curiously. They were young. Not as young as Lawson. Late twenties, early thirties, maybe.

"Ah, yep. Harper?" Lawson motioned for me to come closer, and I did, although I was trying hard not to fidget. "Harper, this is Ritchie, our bass player."

We shook hands. "How do you do, Miss?" He sounded like Sam Elliott, if Sam Elliott were thirty years younger, had chin-length hair and looked like Ansel Elgort.

"Fine, thanks," I said.

"And this is Eric, guitarist number one. Jarrod, guitarist number two. Sam, our mandolinist. And, last but definitely not least," said Lawson, "our percussionist, Carl. Harper, everybody. Everybody, Harper Evans."

They all greeted me with waves and smiles and nice-to-meet-you's, while I stood in hyperawareness of Lawson's hand at the small of my back. These were the guys I'd seen on tv, not just when Lawson performed on Fallon, but almost every video on YouTube. They'd been with him through the years, played a vital part in the rise of a country superstar. That they were still here, still with him, spoke a lot to Lawson's character.

Darlene reappeared and ordered everybody to make their plates. "Hair and makeup's here and said they'll be ready for whoever wants to

go first in fifteen.”

Hair and makeup? This was a serious photoshoot.

The boys started milling about, grabbing and filling plates, laughing and talking amongst themselves. They stole periodic glances at me, and I wondered of the last time they saw Lawson with a girl. Were they comparing us? Making mental notes to tell him later? Then again, my sleep attire could’ve warranted their attention.

“Hey.” I stood tiptoe to speak close to Lawson’s ear.

“Hmm?”

“I’m gonna run upstairs and get a shower, okay? Change my clothes.”

“No breakfast?” His brow furrowed. “Coffee?”

“I’ll grab a leftover biscuit or something after I’m finished. Coffee... well.” I glanced back at the pot that’d just finished dripping to full. “Got a to-go cup I can carry upstairs with me?”

His easy grin set fires beneath me skin. “We are a lot alike, Columbus, you know that? I can forgo breakfast—*maybe*, but coffee? Essential to my mental health.” He pressed his lips to my forehead, and I wished the room would vanish. “I’ll make you a tumbler. Cream and sugar?” he asked, rounding the counter.

“Just cream, thanks.”

I TOOK MY TIME showering and getting dressed. Shaved my legs, washed and dried my hair. Warred with myself over what to wear, which was ridiculous, because who cared? No one. And I certainly shouldn’t have, because I was leaving in a few months, and none of these people would ever remember me. Nonetheless, I chose my best pair of skinny jeans and a white peasant top. In the short time I’d been downstairs meeting Darlene and Lawson’s bandmates, Savana had texted. Twice. The first was a simple *Hey, girl, what’s up? Wanna hang out today, since*

*we're off?* The second was an all caps frantic, *OMG YOU'RE AT LAW'S AREN'T YOU?!!1!*

How she figured these things out was beyond me.

I called her.

She answered with, "I totally forgot he's doing a shoot and an interview for the awards show today."

"That's what his mom said."

"Oh, so you *are* there."

Relentless, this woman. "Yes, Savana, I'm at Lawson's."

She squealed like a child. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. Okay, so, you met Darlene."

"Yes."

"And?"

"She's nice." Better than nice, she was genuine. Just like Lawson.

"Nice? No. Uh huh, honey, Law's mom ain't just nice. Did she ask you to help in the kitchen?"

My mouth opened and closed. "How did you know?"

"Because I know Darlene Hill. Did she?"

"She asked me to check on the biscuits and finish up the eggs." I didn't tell her Lawson wound up taking over the latter. Thank goodness for his intervention. Burnt eggs had always smelled like wet dog fur to me and I'd been teetering the line.

"Whoa." There was a long pause and for a moment I thought I'd lost connection.

"Savana? Are you there?"

"That's a really big deal, you realize that, don't you?"

"Um...no?"

"Seriously. Big deal."

"Why is it a big deal?" I slipped on my white Chucks. "It was just breakfast."

"Hear me out, Evans. Darlene Hill loves her son, and I know what you're gonna say—all mothers love their sons, and maybe that's true.

But Darlene has supported Lawson's music dreams his whole life. She's watched him rise and fall and rise back up again. And," Savana said on a sigh, "she's watched too many stupid girls break his heart."

Girls. In his life. Spending time with him, like I was. And, according to Savana, who knew him way better than I did, breaking his heart again and again. Hence, his streak of not writing. The imbalance that stole his creativity.

I didn't want to be one of those girls, the ones he was used to. Who fawned over him, gave him exactly what they thought he wanted. Though Lawson wasn't technically a rock star, he was close enough. That kind of attention had to be exhausting. The people he met, girls in particular, most of them had probably never bothered to understand the person he really was, the man beneath the eyes, the smile and hot body.

"So, clearly, you're not just another stupid chick to her. Or him."

Gosh, there it was again. Fear. Fear of falling. Fear of moving too fast toward nothing, because there was nothing, not for Lawson and me. I may not've wanted to be another notch in his belt, *just another stupid chick*, but this didn't end well. The final credits featured me leaving. College. Education. Career. A life a lower middle class, motherless girl from Ohio didn't deserve, but that I'd worked my ass off far too hard to lose sight of.

Lawson was already in his rhythm. In his career. He was young, yes, but he was living his goals and dreams. People loved him. People wanted to *be* him. To be near him, to bask in the glow of phenomenal talent.

I was still stuck in the weird limbo between high school and the rest of my existence.

"I gotta go." I brushed sweaty palms down my thighs. Swallowed and told my heart to stop beating so fast. "Talk to you later?"

"Yep. See you on Monday, bright 'n early."

"See ya."

Downstairs in Lawson's music room, the photoshoot was underway. There were people everywhere, setting up lighting, screens, rearranging instruments. Lawson posed in front of a white screen, holding his blue guitar. I stepped back just outside the doorway. Watched as a woman with a towel thrown over her shoulder rushed forward and tinkered with his hair. Lawson murmured something to her. She giggled, then rushed back behind the cameraman, an unmistakable blush to her cheeks.

The cameraman started taking shots in rapid succession.

I committed the moment to memory. The flash of the camera, the music playing in the background, the band members laughing and chatting with each other. It was like watching some sort of documentary. A *We Follow the Band on Tour!* kind of thing. Exciting and wildly surreal.

"So, you're goin' to school in England in the fall." Darlene Hill stood beside me, her gaze bouncing over the room as if taking inventory of every knickknack, every photo, every award. "Law school, is it?"

"Yes. Well...eventually."

"Very ambitious."

"Yeah, maybe. But I like law. Studying cases, exploring all the ways you can use legal avenues to help people with their problems."

"Yeah?" She looked at me, then, her eyes twinkling.

"I believe we're here to help each other. That each of us has a gift that's supposed to be used to benefit other people." I should've shut my mouth. Should've reeled myself in. I didn't know her. She didn't know me. Some people weren't comfortable with what most considered woo-woo nonsense. And yet I kept going. "Sure, it's up to us to discover what that gift is, but, once you find it, the opportunities are infinite."

"Like getting a scholarship to Cambridge. Pretty impressive."

"More like hard work," I said reactively and popped a hand over my mouth. *Shit. What the hell, Evans?* "That is...well..."

"No, no, you're right." Like Lawson's, her smile reached her eyes. "An accomplishment like Cambridge clearly wasn't just given to you."

Really, Harper, I'm impressed. And my son, he's sure as heck impressed. Not too often he meets someone with ambitions that match his own. Last girl he dated, Jenna, she was ambitious enough, but there was no humbleness there, no grounding. You know?"

No, I didn't know. But I wanted to. "Was this the one he dated for —"

"Three years?" She laughed airlessly. "Yeah. That's her. Somethin' else, I'll tell ya. Somethin' else. But then who could blame him for hanging on for so long?" She wasn't looking at me anymore. She was looking at Lawson. We both were. A room full of people and it was hard not to home in on him. He commanded that level of attention. "He thought they shared common interests. We all did. She's a musician, too, you see. Well," she said, correcting herself, "a singer, I should say. She didn't play an instrument. Still doesn't, I don't think."

"What happened?" I asked. "What went wrong?"

"Would you believe me if I said he's too nice?"

Darlene and I looked at one another, then returned our focus to Lawson. Surprising and yet not surprising at all that Savana had mentioned something similar. He was too nice. But then was he? Sure, he was kind and generous. Thoughtful. Sexy as hell, but that had nothing to do with being nice and everything to do with how I felt whenever I was around him. Too nice, though? Was there such a thing as being too nice?

"Nice guys finish last," said Darlene. "Isn't that what they say?"

"I imagine being nice as a good trait."

"I suppose. But some women find nice boring."

"*Boring?*" I said it a little too loud, and heads whipped around, eyes searched to find the culprit, including Lawson's, which landed on me and sparkled with humor.

I ducked my head, cheeks flaming. *Such* an idiot.

Darlene was laughing. "Yes, boring. I know, right?"



I cleared my throat. “I can’t understand how anyone could find him boring.”

Another miniscule lift of her shoulders. “She did, though. Told him she wanted more, more excitement, more adventure, I don’t know. They went all over the place together. California, New York, Paris. Don’t know how much more adventure she wanted, but...in the end, I guess it wasn’t enough. He wasn’t enough. Not for her.”

Tension stretched inside my chest. So, she...*Jenna*...had broken up with him because he wasn’t fun? Even the sound of it in my head rang ridiculous. I thought back to last night, when we’d vegged on the couch and watched movies. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d enjoyed myself so much. When I’d felt that relaxed. And safe. Maybe never.

“He’s hopelessly romantic,” said Darlene. “Guess I’m to blame for that. Falls too fast, too hard, goes all in. There’s no in between with Lawson. It’s all or nothing.”

All.

Or nothing.

Someone yelled for a fifteen-minute break, and Lawson set down his guitar and jogged over to us. “You two look like you’re plotting.” He slipped an arm around my waist and pulled me in to his side.

“Just girl plotting,” said Darlene. “Cooking, knitting, world domination. The usual.”

“Sounds about right.” Lawson pulled back and surveyed my face. “Look at these eyes, Mama, did you see her eyes?”

I couldn’t have hidden my blush if I’d tried. “*Lawson*.” I was hoping my expression conveyed the rest: that his mother was the right there and could he please not?

“I’m serious. Prettiest eyes on earth, these eyes. Like light from the sky reflected in the ocean.” He tilted his head. “Light shining through blue glass.”

“You do have pretty eyes, dear,” said Darlene, but she was checking her watch. “I’ve got a hair appointment at two. Y’all good here?”

“Yep, thanks,” said Lawson, “and for all your help this morning.”

“Aww, you know it ain’t nothin’, sweetheart.” They kissed each other on the cheek. “Y’all be good, now, ya hear?” She looked at both of us pointedly, but her tone was light. “Stay outta trouble. Not too many late nights.”

“Yes ma’am,” Lawson said at the same time I said, “Okay.”

She left and Lawson locked his hands around my waist, drew back just enough to gaze down at me, one eyebrow cocked. What was he up to? “So, I have a proposition for you.”

“Should I be scared?”

His eyes rolled toward the ceiling, then back at me. “Maybe.”

“Shoot.”

“There’s this awards ceremony coming up.”

“Heard something about that.”

“In Vegas.”

“Oh.”

“Have you ever been?”

“No.”

“Do you wanna maybe see it?”

“I...I guess I’ve never really given it much thought.”

“Okay, allow me to rephrase. There’s an awards ceremony in Vegas.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’ve agreed to perform.”

“Okay.”

“I’d like you to be my plus one.” He took a breath. “If you’re interested.”

My mind went blank for five seconds. “You want me to go to Las Vegas with you?”

“Yes.”

“To an awards ceremony.”

“Yes.”

“With people?”

“Generally, there are other people there, yes.”

Another gap in mental capacity came and went. “Lawson, I...that’s a big deal.”

His arms left me and folded over his chest. “It’s too fast, isn’t it?”

His expression in that moment, I couldn’t explain it, not even if I had time and paper and reference books. It was like uncertainty had hit him and he didn’t know how to take it. How to process what he was feeling. Odds and options weighed in his eyes, in his shoulders, which had gone suddenly tense.

Lawson Hill. Unsure of himself. He’d been open with me, vulnerable, told me things I’d bet he hadn’t told a single living soul. Not reporters, not friends. Maybe not even family, although I didn’t know who that might’ve been past his mother.

“Your mom told me something.”

He didn’t respond. Just stared at me, looking more and more tense by the second.

“She said you fall fast. She said you fall hard.”

He looked at his feet, shifted from one to the other.

I took a breath. “We can’t fall for each other, Lawson.”

His head shot up and he stilled, eyes searching mine.

“At the end of the summer, Nashville will be an inevitable dot from thirty-thousand feet.”

His expression softened. Gaze narrowed. Still, he said nothing.

Unable to look at him and say what I knew needed to be said, I averted my eyes. “I don’t want to go to England nursing a broken heart.” I drew in a serrated breath. “I don’t want to miss you so much I can’t move forward, start a life of my own. Because I want that, you know?”

“Harper.”

“I want a life of my own. Sustainable. Independent.”

“Harper.” His voice was low, smooth. So soft I felt it on my skin. “Look at me.”

I did and, for once, he wasn’t smiling.

“You’re in your life.” He reached for my hand. “Here. Now. With me. And I’m grateful for that. I’m grateful you’re giving me your time. I don’t think you understand how much it means to me that of all the things you could be doing, you agreed to come here, to be with me.”

“It’s not like it was a tough decision,” I said.

His mouth quirked. “Maybe not. But you still said yes. So, say yes again. Come to Vegas. Let me buy you a dress and a pair of heels. Let me take you to dinner, show you the lights. Because that’s the way you’ve made me feel, Harper Evans. Here.” He set a hand to his chest. “Lights. All inside. Warm and flickering.” His hand mimicked a heartbeat. “See?”

My lips twisted in attempt to hide my smile. “Your mom also said you’re a romantic.”

“Told you I was.” The grin was back. Beautiful. Blanketing my heart. “Are you sayin’ you’re gonna hold that against me?”

I shook my head. Slipped my hands around his waist. “Not on your life.”

## chapter thirteen

SENIOR YEAR, in AP English-Lit, we spent two weeks studying Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. We dissected it like a starfish. Picked off each limb, attempted to examine the very tissue of Shakespeare's brain. What was the dramatic purpose of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech? Is the conclusion of the play in strict accord with poetic justice? Is fourteen really a good age to get married?

The most popular question, however, was the most cliché of the lot.

How was it possible for two people who knew nothing of each other to fall so deeply in love at first sight?

My classmates had their respective insights. Some believed it too fictitious to be true. Others claimed that, well, things were just different back then. Relationships were less complicated before radio and television and movie theaters.

I'd raised my hand and proposed that, perhaps, the depth of emotion was already there and had been there all along. Here were two families who'd hated one another for as long as anyone could remember. Deep seated hatred, as it turned out, was as powerful as the most profound love. Everyone had stared, faces contorted. There were snickers, whispers. I wondered if I'd sprouted a tail and horns.

"There's a fine line between love and hate," I'd said and blushed, because of how unoriginal the phrase was, regardless of its truth.

But I was at the top of my class and, gradually, the expressions of my peers changed to thoughtfulness. Maybe even awe. The teacher was definitely impressed.

I didn't believe it, though. How could two people experience the greatest emotion ever instantly? Wasn't that more reaction than reality? Anger, lust, rage, compassion—all things that could be switched off as quickly as they were switched on. Certainly, more plausible than love at first sight.

Lawson Hill had me betting against my own belief system.

It was madness. A sweet, profound chaos. And yet we slipped into an ease that had me questioning what life was like before, if I was ever living at all, and how I was supposed to survive after him. When he got up at two in the morning, always it was two or shortly thereafter, and sat at the piano or picked up one of his guitars to work out whatever was causing him to lose sleep, I got up, too. I watched. I learned. But most of all I allowed myself to visualize the future me. The new associate at a prestigious law firm. The young lawyer living the dream in a fancy high rise, working files in a fashionable office with a great view. It was a pretty picture. Satisfying. The vision, the dream. But would it compare to this? Would success give me the same feeling of happiness I felt in those moments while Lawson played, and I listened?

Lawson drove me to work, but by the third straight day of dropping me off and picking me up, he'd drawn a crowd.

"You should just quit," Savana said. She'd called within seconds of me getting into Lawson's truck and pulling away from the library.

"I can't quit my job, Savana."

"Why? You don't need to work."

"Neither do you."

Lawson turned down the radio.

"Touché. But let's not make this about me. You're leaving in a couple of months, right?"

"Yes."

“It’s not like you have a lot of time *not* to be realistic, you get me?”

“What are you saying?”

“You can’t work anyplace in this city and date Lawson Hill at the same time.”

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. He was silently mouthing the lyrics to a Keith Urban song, tapping out the beat on the steering wheel.

“Maybe I should just go back home,” I said and instantly felt his gaze on the side of my face. “Get back into routine.”

“Yeah, okay. Sure. Is that really what you want?”

I at least gave a couple seconds of pause, then answered honestly, “No.”

“All right, then. You can’t date Lawson Hill, live with him, allow him to drive you to and from work, and expect people not to notice.”

“So, I’ll get the car. Dad left me the keys, told me to use it.”

Lawson inhaled a deep breath. Released it in degrees.

“Yeah, you could do that. Only…”

“Only what?”

“Well, you’ve been spotted. You’ve been seen. With him. People are getting curious. They want to know who you are, why you’re with him.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Closed my eyes. I should’ve known this was coming. Should’ve realized what it would mean when I made the decision to be with him. When *we* did—Lawson was just as much a part of this as I was. Anxiety flirted with the edges of my nerves and I forced myself to breathe through my nose, pushed against the threat of nausea.

“I don’t mean to be a blunt jackass,” said Savana, “but your life in this town just got flipped on its rear. Have you heard from your dad?”

“Some.” But not much. The conversations were always clipped, pleasantries followed by his insistence that he had to get to some meeting and would call me later. Later turned out to be two days and a series of texts.

*Everything okay?*

*Yep.*

*Good. Love you.*

*Love you, too.*

“Well, I’ve told you what I think.” Savana sighed into the phone. “Look, Harper, you know I love Law. He’s like a brother to me. But I’m kinda fond of you, too, and for what it’s worth, I think you’re great together. I’ve never seen him happier. If giving up the summer job you don’t even need means you get to spend more time with the guy you like, shit, girl, why are we even having this conversation?”

Laughter broke through my discomfort. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right.”

“What? What was that again? Speak into my good ear.”

“Nope. Not gonna say it.”

“Say it.”

“I said *maybe*.”

“Nuh uh. I wanna hear you say it. *You are right, Savana.*”

“Fine. You are right, Savana. There. Happy?”

“Not a hundred percent, but it’ll do. Hey, did I tell you? I’ve got an audition in the morning.”

“What? Are you serious? Oh my gosh, Savana, that’s great! What’s it for?”

“Just a little indie film. But you never know.”

“That’s amazing. Really. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ll let me know how it goes?”

“Of course. Hey, put me on speaker.” I did, and she said, “What’s up, Law?”

The edge of his mouth kicked up. “Hey, hey, Savvy.”

“You takin’ care of my girl?”

He glanced at me and the look in his eyes made my heart stutter. “Tryin’ my best.”

“Better be. Love you guys. Talk later.”



“Love you, too,” Lawson and I said at the same time.

Two songs played on the radio before Lawson finally spoke. “So, are we gonna talk about your conversation with Savvy? Not that it’s any of my business, of course, but it kinda sounded like it might be a little bit my business.”

I leaned my head back against the headrest. “She said people are starting to notice.”

“Starting to notice what?”

“Come on. You didn’t see the group of teenage girls outside the library today?”

His hand tightened around the steering wheel.

“Or what about yesterday?” I asked. “When one girl took her shirt off, right there on the sidewalk, for God and everybody to see?”

“Was that before or after someone screamed my whole name like an exorcised demon?”

I cocked my head at him, pursed my lips.

“Okay, yeah. Yes.” His throat bobbed. “Yes, I noticed.”

“And it didn’t bother you?”

“This is my life, Harper. Does it bother me? Of course, it does. But I’ve gotten so used to it, I’ve learned to brush them off. Ignore them. You should, too.”

“Oh, really? That’s what I should do? Just ignore girls flashing you their boobs? Great.” I slapped my knee. “So easy. Why didn’t I think of that to begin with? Ignore the boobs. Gotcha.”

Laughing, he said, “Okay, you’re right. That’s a tough request.”

“You think?”

“Boobs are pretty hard to ignore.” His gaze dropped down my neck and I was suddenly aware I’d opted for one of my tighter t-shirts that day.

“You are...”

“Yes?”

“Impossible.”

“Right. I’m impossible and you’re the one wearing...” He spared me a glance, then returned his eyes to the road. “That.”

“It’s a top and loose pants.” One of my cuter outfits, actually, a 90’s homage to Rachel Green. Baby tee with a cute angel print and high-waist wide leg pants that looked awesome with Chucks.

“Those pants do things to your ass, darlin’,” he said and quickly added, “sorry, that was crude,” but I was already unbuckling my seatbelt and sitting up, trying to get a good look at my butt.

He laughed so hard I felt my own laughter bubbling up in my chest. “All right, Columbus, get your seatbelt on, would you?”

“I’m trying to see what all the fuss is about.”

“We can assess the situation when we’re safe inside the house. You have my word.”

As it turned out, Lawson wasn’t a man who broke promises. The moment we stepped inside, his hands were on me, yanking my body against his and kissing me until we were both gasping for breath.

“Wrap your legs around me, darlin’, I’m taking you upstairs.”

The thought to argue, object for femininity’s sake, didn’t enter my mind. I looped my arms around his neck, and he picked me up with ease, his hands cupping my ass as my legs circled his waist. He carried me upstairs. Kissing my chin, my neck. He might’ve been holding a feather pillow, easily as he maneuvered from stairs to landing to my room.

Once inside, he laid me down on the bed and hovered over me. His head dipped. Our lips met. My hands were in his hair. One of his pushed into the space of mattress beside my head, while the other—the other gently moved my knee to the side, spreading my legs enough so that he could nestle his hips in between them.

His body on top of mine.

The weight of him.

I’d had the thought before, but then we’d only been tucked together on the couch.

This was so much different.

He shifted, an nth of a degree, and my body responded as if it knew exactly what it wanted before I did. His necklace dangled between us. Before my brain had time to process what was happening, I tugged the chain and pulled him into a hard kiss, one that went on and on. He felt perfect. We fit perfect. And our kisses, it was like we'd been made for this. Like every kiss we'd shared had been growing and simmering, leading to this moment. My hands roamed greedily, down his neck, his back and around his waist.

As if he could read my mind, he pulled back, reached behind his head and tugged off his shirt.

I inhaled sharply. *Shit*. Of course he was just as beautiful out of his clothes as in them. Of course, his chest was defined and smooth. Because how else would a music god look? While his abs might not've been the beloved six-pack everybody seemed to gush about, his stomach was flat and toned. A runner's body, I thought, as he murmured for me to *come here*.

His voice was low, raspy, and I sat up halfway, raised my arms so he could remove my shirt. A quick twist of its front clasp and my bra went next, discarded. His gaze roamed over me, snagging on my hardened nipples. Save for the girls' locker room and maybe my lady doctor, I'd never been naked with anyone. But I was at ease with Lawson.

He set a hand over my heart for one, two, three beats.

Then he swallowed and replaced his hand with his lips.

A pained moan fled my lips as he kissed a path between my breasts. I arched my back. Bit my lower lip. His tongue circled a nipple and then he was taking me in his mouth, suckling gently and, holy cow, all the oxygen in the room dissipated. He paved a road to the other breast, a trail of open-mouthed kisses and sweeps of his tongue. Thought died. All I could do was feel—his lips, his hands, his hips slowly grinding against mine.

“Lawson...” I pressed myself into him, drew him close with my legs. My panties were drenched, sticking to my folds. “I want...please.”

His mouth took mine as our bodies moved together, mine rising to meet his in perfect tandem. We were tightly melded. Skin to skin, my breasts flattened beneath his chest. He ground hard, kissed me harder. I imagined us naked. Imagined he was already inside me.

“Harper.” I loved the way he said my name. It was so fucking hot, and my name had never been hot. Not even close. “I wanna see you when you come.”

My eyes flew open and there were his, staring back at me, his irises a mere rim of blue around his enlarged pupils. He didn’t stop. His hips kept moving, simulating sex, and suddenly the build reached a vivid crescendo.

I cried out, gasping. My body shuddered, convulsing around nothing when I wanted so badly for it to be him. He watched me. Even though I’d shut my eyes, allowing the euphoria to run through my body, I felt his gaze. Assessing, learning, committing to memory. His chest heaved and he asked if I was all right and I whispered *yes*. Yes, I was, but, no, I wasn’t.

Not by half.

Lawson’s phone buzzed in his back pocket and he excused himself, stepping out of the room and easing the door shut. I laid there for several minutes, bare breasted, gradually allowing the air to fill my lungs.

Real.

This was real.

We’d moved to a new city, I’d met a boy, and I was beginning to fall for him.

Hard.

I covered my eyes with the back of my hand, drew in a breath through my nose. This was already hurting. My head, my heart. I was making choices that didn’t fit with the design. Dad’s absence wasn’t planned, but there was nothing I could do about that. Keeping a summer

job? Important. Or, at least, I'd thought it was. If I was seeing any other boy, someone normal, someone ordinary, a college student, perhaps, it wouldn't be this way. We could go out. He could see me anytime he wanted, in any setting he chose. People wouldn't bother us. People wouldn't care.

That was the problem.

Too many people cared about Lawson Hill. Including me.

I got up. Took a shower. My body was still humming. Drunk in the aftermath of coming apart beneath the sexiest man I'd ever met.

Tonight, everyone was supposed to come over for the weekly jam session, but Savana called as I was drying my hair and said they were skipping. Two band members in a group slotted to perform at a local café had gotten sick and the café's owner needed a replacement. It couldn't be just anybody, she claimed. The café was world-renowned, historic. Artists like LeAnn Rimes and Rascal Flatts were known to drop in, unannounced.

Lawson volunteered.

He hadn't performed a full set, Savana said, in eight months.

"Are you nervous?" he asked. The record label had sent a limo to pick us up. Lawson looked sharp in all black: jeans, tee, leather boots. His hair was shiny and styled. I wished I'd had something smarter to match him. As it was, I'd pulled my hair back in a ponytail and opted for minimal makeup, the one LBD I owned, and the kitten heels that matched. His hand squeezed mine in the backseat of the limo.

"A little," I admitted. "I just agreed to quit my job, because too many people were noticing us together and yet here we are."

"Going out in public." He nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. There's nothing to be sorry for."

"Still. It's a lot, when you're not used to it. I get that." In the dim light, his eyes met mine. "I just want you to know that I'm appreciative." He brought my knuckles to his lips.

"Are *you* nervous?"

“Before a show? You know the answer to that.”

“Savana said it’s a small setting. Ninety seats or so.”

“Crowd size doesn’t matter. Large or small, I’m still up there, offering up pieces of myself and hoping someone, anyone will connect with even one little slice.”

I didn’t know how to respond, the right words to say to offer a pillar of support. He was amazing. He’d reached millions worldwide and yet he was still unsure of himself. A mere boy taking the stage for the first time, taking the chance he’d either be received or rejected.

“Hey, can I tell you something?” He leaned into me. “Might be a little crude.”

“I can take crude.”

His lips touched my neck. “You’re gorgeous when you come,” he whispered, and I had the fleeting thought I should’ve shoved an extra pair of panties into the small shoulder bag I’d brought.

Upon arrival, we were pulled in opposite directions. Savana was waiting for me at the crowded entrance, her blonde hair gleaming. Chris was at her side, nursing a cocktail.

“Come on. We’ve got a table.” Savana motioned for me to follow. “Right up front.”

“You look nice.” Chris nudged her arm against mine. She looked like a starlet in an off-the-shoulder red sweater, skinny jeans and heels. “Fun times, right?”

“Thanks. Yeah.” The place was packed, standing room only, save for one empty round table that had a RESERVED sign on it. As Savana said, it was directly in front of the stage.

We sat and I allowed my eyes to carefully travel the room. Large black and white photos of famous singers and songwriters dotted black walls. White icicle lights hung across the stage and the bar in the back of the room. It was small. Cozy. What most people would call a hole in the wall, seeing as it was, indeed, in the middle of a shopping strip downtown.

“Steven Tyler was here last week.” Savana offered me one of the two vodka tonics the waitress set before her. “Liquid courage?”

“No, thanks.” I smiled at the waitress. “Just water, please, thanks.”

“*Just water, please, thanks.*” Savana laughed, sipped her mixed drink. “You and Chris with your no-drinking policy.”

“Hello.” Chris raised her own glass. “I do drink sometimes, thank you very much, just not as often as you do.” She looked at me, patted her neck. “Vocal cords. Gotta take care of ‘em.”

Two women at the table next to mine were staring, their gazes lingering well-past acceptability, until I finally looked away. There were more, too. More prying eyes, more whispers. I overheard someone say, “That’s her. That’s the girl I was telling you about. The one he’s been hangin’ out with.”

“Hey.” Chris placed a hand on my wrist where it rested on the table. “Don’t worry about them, okay? Ever seen that movie where Kevin Costner’s a baseball player? What’s it called?”

“For Love of the Game,” Savana provided.

I nodded. I knew the movie.

“Remember what he used to say when the crowd was getting really loud and he needed to pitch?” Chris tapped her temple. “Clear the mechanism. Well, that’s what you’ve gotta do. Silence them. Their stares, whatever they’re saying. Don’t listen to anything but the truth: that Lawson’s with you, because he wants to be.”

“Clear the mechanism.” The words sounded strange but somehow effective. Like maybe I really could make the room vanish, or at least choose not to engage their curiosity. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Oh! Here we go!”

“Folks, we’ve got a little surprise for you tonight.” An older man wearing jeans and a loose button up spoke into one of two microphones perched in front of two stools on the stage. “I’ve known this young man since he was fourteen years old and not only writing songs for himself but songs for other artists. He’s one of the most talented young

musicians on the scene, a multi-platinum, Grammy-winning singer/songwriter, and we are so proud to have him here with us. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mr. Lawson Hill.”

Chairs scraped across the brushed cement floor. People stood, clapped, hooted and hollered. The atmosphere vibrated as Lawson walked on stage, guitar strapped to his chest. He raised a hand, his famous smile intact.

The cheers got louder. He sat down and the man who’d introduced him picked up an acoustic guitar and sat on the stool next to him.

“Hello. I’m Lawson Hill.” Several girls screamed and his grin widened. “I appreciate y’all comin’ out. I’m gonna play a few songs tonight, some you may know, some you may not. Some *I* may not.”

Laughter filled the room as he strummed a few chords on his guitar.

“So, just sit back, relax, and let’s do somethin’ a little different. Let’s start with a song by the great Johnny Cash.”

His gaze found mine and the pulse in my neck throbbed as applause split the air. He picked out the first notes of what might’ve sounded like an indie acoustic song, until he started singing, his voice a now-familiar balm. “*Well, I hear the train a comin’, it’s rollin’ ‘round the bend, and I ain’t seen the sunshine in I don’t know when...*”

Chris kissed her closed fingers. “Like melted buttah.”

She was right. His voice was so smooth, so powerful, even the waitresses stopped serving to watch him. Emotion wrapped around every word. The ease of his fingers gliding across the fret board had some of the guys in the crowd *whew*-ing. When he was finished, as the audience was still clapping, he went directly into another song. One I knew instantly, because it’d been on repeat on my iPod for months. *Birds* by Imagine Dragons.

“Now, that’s different.” Chris scooted further toward the edge of her seat.

But not for him, it wasn’t. He’d played it on the piano in the hours of early morning, when he couldn’t sleep. Every note, high and low, hit



perfect. It couldn't have been an easy song to sing. But the control he had, especially when he sang the *oohs* in the chorus, had the collective expressions of everybody in the room in a state of wonder.

"Jesus, that's beautiful." Savana leaned over Chris toward me. "That's a two-a.m. song, isn't it?"

I smiled at her in answer, and she winked at me, sipped her drink.

*"Seasons, they will change. Life will make you grow. Dreams will make you cry, cry, cry. Everything is temporary. Everything will slide. Love will never die, die, die. I know that ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh birds fly in every direction..."*

In that moment, a piece of me died and was reborn, changed. I thought about earlier, in my bedroom, when it was only the two of us. The bond I felt, the closeness. There was no denying the physical attraction. Lawson was a beautiful man. But this was more. It delved further, deeper. The man I watched pour his soul out on stage was a good man. A man of heart and virtue.

He played a five-song set, ending with a slower, acoustic version of *Maelstrom* that had the whole room singing along. After, the man who'd accompanied Lawson on stage caught my attention and gestured for me to follow him.

"Go." Savana shooed me. I wondered how many drinks she'd had. "Go, go, go. I'll text you later."

"'Night, Harper." Chris planted a kiss on my cheek. Then, squeezing my hand, she whispered, "For what it's worth, I'm so glad it's you."

## chapter fourteen

IT FELT AS IF I was slipping into someone else's life. Degree by degree, like movers going into a house and coming out with boxes to load a U-Haul, Lawson wrapped the slivers of my past, moved them aside, and replaced them with pieces of him. He took me to a restaurant with a menu that required a translator, and he took me to one that served all-you-can-eat catfish for six bucks a plate. He took me on a helicopter ride that ended in a private tour of the Grand Ole Opry. And he took me for a round of miniature golf that ended with ice cream and a walk on the bridge over the Cumberland River.

On Sunday, he took me to church.

Not in the Hozier, hot kind of way, although I couldn't lie—I *had* entertained the idea once or twice.

We donned our Sunday best, me in my go-to LBD and short heels, Lawson in his sexy dress slacks and baby blue button-up, and we attended worship service. I'd been to church before, but only for holidays and a couple of weddings. This church was beautiful. Sleek wooden pews, green carpet and fresh flowers. Up front, a woman was playing *Amazing Grace* on an upright piano. We were greeted with firm handshakes, Lawson with a few hugs and *welcome backs*.

"I don't get to come a lot." He gestured to an empty space next to an elderly woman wearing a beautiful white fascinator. "Not as much as

I'd like to, anyway."

"Why today, then?"

He stretched an arm over the back of the pew. His thumb grazed my shoulder. "Thought maybe we could both use some uplifting." He winked at me.

*Uplifting* may've been too weak a word to describe the next couple of hours. The service was phenomenal. More than once, I found myself pushing a finger to my eyes, attempting to block tears. Dad wasn't raised in religion. So, naturally, I wasn't, either. But the singing at Mt. Zion Baptist Church that morning filled the entire room, reached down to something deep inside, something I hadn't known was there. Maybe it was the singing. Maybe it was the pastor's impassioned speech. Maybe it was Lawson's hand gripping mine and the warmth of him next to me.

Whatever the central cause, emotion climbed higher and higher up my throat, until finally the woman in the fancy hat quietly handed me a tissue. I smiled, nodded my thanks. Then I gazed up at Lawson, at his serene expression, and felt a sense of such peace I almost sighed aloud. He didn't seem the least bit bothered that we were the only white people in attendance. Or that I didn't know the words to any of the songs and struggled when the pastor asked us to flip with him to Romans 12:12. It didn't matter. His hands found the exact spot, his finger pointing to the verse as our heads bent together.

He was just him. I was just me. And it felt...right. Every moment was new, special, the kind you want to remember. The kind you keep going back to, beautiful reminders that good times are possible.

In the days leading to Vegas, we went shopping. Not because I wanted to, but because he insisted. It wasn't easy. He had his agent—the famous Katie I'd heard him talking to before and who'd flown with us to Vegas—write up a list of stores. Then, she called and requested private shopping. That was his life, mostly. People hired to do every job imaginable: cleaning, mowing, calling ahead to stores and eateries to ensure he wasn't bombarded the moment his foot crossed the threshold.

He had nutritionist, a fitness trainer, a personal shopper and, oh yes, a team of lawyers to negotiate entertainment contracts.

I'd teased him that it was a wonder he didn't have a butler and a chauffeur, like in Downton Abbey.

"But without the British accent, obviously," he'd said, reminding me of when I'd teased him, "because that would just be too much."

"Right." What he didn't realize was I adored his southern drawl. It was smooth, sexy, and it comforted me in ways I hadn't realized needed comforting. Like when we were tucked in together on the couch and he was murmuring song lyrics in my hair. Or when he was waiting on an overstuffed lounge chair outside a dressing room, and I stepped out wearing outfit number twenty-six, and he sat up straight, eyes alight and murmured, "Gosh, darlin', that's beautiful. You're beautiful."

My heart was full of him.

I wanted Dad to know. Wanted to share how happy I was, assure him I was okay, that Lawson was wonderful and, no, I hadn't done anything stupid. Not yet, anyway.

But every time I called I got his voicemail. And every time I texted it took forever for him to finally answer with a clipped *Can't talk right now. Later?* Only later never came. Our relationship felt one-sided. It was weird. I knew he was alive. That was at least something. I tried to tell myself this was what it would be like when I was away at college. Distance, missing each other's calls, quick proof-of-life texts. But I needed to tell him about Lawson. Needed to share my happiness with the only other man in my life—the man who'd always been there for me.

"It's just a moment," Lawson said when I finally confessed my concern. He'd been probing me ever since we boarded the plane, because I had tried. I'd tried to call Dad, let him know where I was going. Force of habit, I supposed, the dutiful daughter checking in.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean our lives are a series of moments, hustle and flow, and your dad's in a life moment that's out of the norm of what you're used to, and

maybe what he's used to, but it's just a moment, and moments pass."

"I guess so. I'm just, I don't know, a little worried." I huffed out a laugh. "Maybe a lot worried. Plus, I'm on a plane. Going to Vegas. He should know that."

"I get you're worried, Harper." He laced his fingers with mine, rested our joined hands on his thigh. "But you're an adult, capable of deciding where you want to go, when you want to go and who you want to go with, if you want to go with anybody."

"Good, because I plan on ditching you the second this plane hits the tarmac in Vegas."

A lopsided smile. "Is that a fact?"

"Yep. You're on your own. I'm hitting the strip. Casinos, tattoo shops, maybe a titty bar or two."

He squeezed his eyes shut. Head thrown back in a fit of laughter.

The guy across the aisle where we were sitting in first class lowered his newspaper and glared at us from over his reading glasses.

"What? You don't believe me?"

"Can't believe you said..." He was laughing so hard he couldn't catch his breath. "I can't believe you said titty bar."

"Well, that's what they are, right?"

He thumbed tears from his eyes. His face was pink. "Yeah, but I don't think I've ever—and I do mean *ever* heard a girl say that."

"Hey, you're not the only one who can be crude, buddy. I've got a mouth and I'm not afraid to use it."

His laughter faded into a smug grin. He arched a brow. "Do you now?"

My cheeks heated at the implication. We hadn't had another moment like the one after my last day of work. We'd kissed. We'd kissed a lot. A collection of hours, off and on, off and on, that had left us breaking away each time with a gasp. He tasted so good. I'd memorized his lips, his tongue, the brush of his nose against mine, the way his cheek muscles moved when he was *really* kissing me. The fall of his lashes on

the crests of his cheeks when he closed his eyes. The fierceness that took my breath away when those same eyes opened. The laziness of his grin, when he was comfortable.

As we deboarded the plane, an attendant asked for his autograph and he obliged, signing a drink napkin for her.

“Thanks!” She looked from him to me and back again. I raised my brows. “Well, good luck at the awards show tonight! I’m sure you’ll be great!”

“Thanks.” Lawson threaded his fingers with mine. “There should be security when we reach the end of the terminal,” he said as we walked ahead of the other passengers. It wasn’t lost on me that we’d been allowed to deboard first.

“Security?”

“Always security.” Katie was behind us, thumbs flying on her phone. “Car’s ready at the front, Law.”

“Okay.”

“What about our bags?” I asked.

“Already on their way to the hotel.” Katie tucked her phone inside her purse, smiled at me. I liked her. Recently divorced, she was in her mid-thirties and more organized than an army general. *Let me check your calendar* was her response to ninety percent of what Lawson said.

“Cool,” was my lame response.

“Everything’s good, Harper,” said Lawson, but his smile was rueful. And maybe a touch melancholic. Almost as if he was apologizing. “We’re just moving from point A to point B.”

“And onto C,” Katie finished.

Right.

“Just don’t let go of my hand,” he said. “Can you do that?”

I nodded.

His anxiety wasn’t misplaced. Three police officers stood at the mouth of the terminal, armed with handguns and walkie-talkies.

“Welcome to Las Vegas, Mr. Hill,” one said. “This way.”

“Thanks,” said Lawson. “I appreciate your help.”

“Oh, it’s no problem.” The officer’s leather belt squeaked as he led our little entourage, the other two officers falling into step behind. “You performing tonight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Guess they’re airing it live again. Good thing, too. My wife’s been talking about this for weeks.” He chuckled. “She’s got a thing for you, you know.” He gave Lawson a raised look from over his shoulder.

“Sorry, man.” Lawson pointed up. “It’s the hair.”

The officer laughed. “Must be.”

The airport was crazy. Neon everywhere, shops and slot machines. I didn’t notice we were near the exit until I heard the screams. Barricades held back at least three dozen teenage girls. They were jumping up and down. Yelling Lawson’s name. Waving photos, cds, vinyl records and pens in the air to get his attention.

“Now you see why we need security?” said Katie as the lead officer held up his hand in, what I realized was, an effort to discourage anyone from breaching the metal barriers. “Everywhere we go. Doesn’t matter how secretive we try to be—and, believe me, we try, but they always know. That you two haven’t been bombarded on one of your outings, well...Miracles happen every day.”

Indeed. We hadn’t been, as Katie pointed out, bombarded. Sure, people had recognized Lawson. A few had approached him, shaken his hand. For the most part, he’d been allowed his privacy, like anyone else.

“You played a big role in that, though,” I reminded her, and she shrugged.

“Part of the job.”

“How long have you been with him?”

“Since the beginning.”

“Hey, give me a minute.” Lawson let go of my hand, giving Katie the universal *one second* signal when she barked a protest.

“Lawson!” Her hands slapped against her thighs. “Gah, I hate it when he...”

Deafening screams drowned out the last bit of Katie’s sentence.

Lawson was signing autographs. Posing for selfies, his smile an absolute marvel in every shot. He shook hands, didn’t balk when arms were thrown around his neck, said *thank you, good to see you, too, thank you so much* like a record caught on a piece of fuzz, skipping, skipping, skipping.

“That’s why he’s so popular.” Katie kicked her chin toward Lawson. “He’s good to them. Gives his time, his attention, and they love him for it.”

The limo ride to the MGM Grand consisted of Katie relaying Lawson’s schedule for the rest of the day and evening. Ten minutes to change clothes, then on to the arena for sound check, rehearsal, a prescheduled interview, five minutes for food, a panel with several other artists and the press, a brief meet-and-greet, another car ride.

I listened, but only partially. Outside, massive buildings rose above palm trees and fountains. Heavy traffic slowed us down, but I didn’t mind. Tourist Harper had arrived and there was no stopping her eyes from gobbling up every morsel they could, even if it was from the shaded window of a limousine. The city lived up to everything I’d ever read or heard about Vegas. At least, from this view it did. There were glowing signs, shops, spas, restaurants and people. So many people. Lights, glamour, animation and wealth. *Damn*, I mouthed, wondering how much of it I would get to see, if Lawson’s schedule even allowed for nonconformity.

“Okay,” I responded to whatever Katie had just said that included my name.

“And if the cameras become too much, remember, look above, not straight into them,” she went on, narrating as I gawked at the scenery, “and, for heaven’s sake, don’t answer questions about your relationship.”



That. That's what grabbed my attention. "I'm sorry, what?"

She was sitting across from Lawson and me, phone in hand, looking at me as if I'd just asked for fish-flavored ice cream. "Have you been listening to anything I've said?"

"Not really."

Lawson chuckled softly.

"Red carpet, cameras, potential interviews." Katie flicked her hand. "Anything?"

"She'll be fine." Lawson's hand settled above my knee. "Right, Columbus? You're good. We're all good."

"Uh huh." But I wasn't good. I was nervous as hell.

The record label had booked two suites. I thought Katie and I would be sharing, but Lawson laid my assumptions to bed when he didn't let go of my hand until we were in his room.

The moment the lock snicked, he had me against the door, his hands in my hair and his lips on mine.

"Hey!" Katie called from the other side. "Ten minutes! You only have ten minutes and you still have to change! No funny business!"

Lawson laughed against my mouth. "Funny business. Who says that?"

"Very organized people, apparently." Shit, he was sexy. I felt like that chick in *The Night Manager* when Tom Hiddleston pulled her in his hotel room, and they had frantic sex against the wall. I ran my fingers through the back of his hair, down his neck. I wished we were having sex against the wall. "So, what should I do?"

His head bent and he kissed my neck. "Anything you want."

"Well, I assume I can't come with you."

"No. Not until tonight." He pulled back, set a hand to the door beside my head. His expression was rueful. "Sorry. But I promise you'll love the show."

"And the red carpet?" I was still nervous about the idea of walking with him in front of people. Of flashing cameras, other celebrities, being

out in the open like that. Not that I'd never been out in the open before. I wasn't a zoo animal. It's just that I'd never anticipated that level of exposure while I was with Lawson. The event was live. Televised.

"You'll be fine." He kissed my forehead. Then my nose. "I can't wait for people to see you, meet you."

"What if I fuck something up?" The words rushed out before I could catch them.

Lawson's eyes flashed with amusement. "What exactly do you think you'll be doing, Columbus? It's not spelling bee or a mathletes competition, it's an awards show. You sit back and enjoy the music and the atmosphere."

"For your information, Mr. Hill, I wasn't in mathletes." I kissed the cleft of his chin. "But I *was* state spelling bee champion and you're right. I'll be fine. I just...want you to shine."

"With you on my arm? Not a problem."

WITHIN TWENTY MINUTES of Lawson leaving for rehearsal, I realized Katie hadn't just come along to take care of Lawson. She'd made a separate schedule especially for me. A team of people from the hotel spa appeared at the door, asked if I was Miss Harper Evans and, at my assent, said they were there to assist in getting me ready and set up shop inside the room.

I showered with the body wash and scrub they gave me. A heady blend of almond and sandalwood that carried enough masculinity to make me think of Lawson the entire time I was in the shower. Maybe that was the point. This was his night, after all. How could I not focus on him? Problem was I couldn't stop imagining it was his hands on my body, not my own. His fingers massaging my legs, my bottom, my breasts. By the time I washed my hair, shaved my legs and bikini line, my libido had risen to the point I was slick with need.

Desperate to relieve the ache, I masturbated in the shower.

Wasn't the first time.

Usually I preferred my bed, but I couldn't help myself. Couldn't stop my fingers from circling my clit, envisioning he was there, too, watching. Wanting me. Stroking himself as I'd wanted to stroke him, because, damn, kissing wasn't enough anymore. Touching his hair, face, neck, arms wasn't enough anymore. I didn't want limitations. I wanted him. All of him, in every way possible. Back against the tiled wall, eyes closed, I came fast, hard, my gasps drowned out by the steady spray from the showerhead.

A knock at the door, followed by a tentative, "Miss Evans? Are you okay? We really need to move on to your hair, if possible."

My answered, "yes," was breathless. Body pulsing, I swallowed and tried again. "Just a minute."

It took five, but I pulled myself together. Dried off, slipped on the matching bra and panty set I'd bought specifically for the occasion. Wrapped myself in the white spa robe they'd given me.

From there, the professionals took over. Nails and toes filed, buffed and painted with a neutral shade of pinkish taupe. Hair blown out and swept back into a soft, feminine ponytail. Makeup that wasn't overly done but enhanced my eyes and the fullness of my lips. As I was stepping into my dress, Katie popped in to grab Lawson's suit.

She paused to give me a full once-over.

"Very nice." She moved around me as if I was a statue at a museum. "Subtle. Elegant. I added some inserts to your heels, since you'll be in them for a while tonight."

"Thanks." Nervousness pushed its way up my throat all over again. This was really happening. I was accompanying Lawson Hill to an awards ceremony.

"Don't freak out on me, okay?" She tucked Lawson's dress shoes beneath her arm, then moved a tendril that'd been left to frame my face further back toward my ear. "The press is super excited Lawson's here."

“Well...” Confusion bent my brows together. “That’s a good thing. Right?”

“He may or may not have told them he’s writing and working up a new album, something that sounds different from anything they’ve ever heard from him before.”

“Okay.” I drew out the word, not understanding where she was going.

“A reporter asked what inspired him to step outside his musical comfort zone.”

She didn’t finish. She stared at me, and while she didn’t appear upset or angry, she wasn’t smiling, either. No, it was concern I saw in her eyes. Mingled with fear.

Realization bit at my cheeks, heating them. “Katie.”

“It’s fine.” She caught the eye of one of the spa employees. “Can you make sure she’s zipped up, please? I’ve gotta keep Mr. Hill on schedule.” Her hand seized mine, squeezed. Her head tilted. “You look beautiful, Harper. Just smile, okay? Smile until your cheeks hurt and then smile some more. He’ll be here in a few minutes to pick you up. Okay?”

I nodded vigorously, though I felt close to hurling. He’d mentioned me to a reporter. In a room full of people. People who were hanging on his every word, writing, recording. What had he been thinking? Sure, I held a certain ignorance when it came to Lawson’s world of celebrity, but some things—some things you just understood. A famous person opening up too much about his personal life was a big no-no. Lawson knew that. This wasn’t his first rodeo, so to speak.

The spa crew had no sooner wiped every last trace of their presence from the room and left me to my over-panicked thoughts than a *tap-tap-tap* came to the door.

I could do this. One night, a whole lot of smiles, and everything would go back to normal. Whatever normal was now I’d met Lawson Hill. I wasn’t sure. But I would survive.

Pulling in a breath, I opened the door, and nearly

lost  
my  
shit.

Goosebumps scraped down my arms as I drank him in like a woman starved to lay eyes on the last good-looking man on planet earth before she finally, finally takes her last breath. Is this what I'd been reduced to? A wordless, brainless, slack-jawed groupie?

Apparently so.

He wore a black suit with a signature white button-down, black tie with a slender gold clip about halfway down. And black Chucks.

Funnily enough, it was the sneakers that calmed my desperation. "I could've sworn Katie left out of here with a pair of dress shoes."

"She knows I don't wear them." His eyes took me in with a precision that stirred my blood. His throat worked before he spoke, "Wow, Harper, you look..."

I passed a hand over the gold brocade of the sleeveless sheath dress. Simple and, as Katie had pointed out, elegant, even though I wasn't exactly sure how elegant felt. Looking up at him from under my lashes, I said, using his words, "Like an amen?"

His smile tugged at my insides.

At the mind that he'd woven himself into.

At the heart that knew better than to allow a fall this hard but did it anyway.

"Like an amen." He offered his arm. "Shall we?"

## chapter fifteen

“BREATHE, BABY. YOU GOT THIS.”

In the series of seconds that ticked by, from the limo gliding to a halt, the door on Lawson’s side opening, Lawson’s hand giving my thigh a final squeeze and, thank goodness for small favors, his soothing voice telling me to *breathe, baby*, I suddenly understood why the heart had to be encaged. Because otherwise it would’ve shoved itself up my throat from sheer overexertion.

Lawson stepped out first, looking like every woman’s fantasy as he buttoned his suit jacket and waved to a plethora of flashes and subsequent screams. Then he reached for me, head ducked inside the door, eyes connecting with mine.

“You’re up, Columbus.”

I hadn’t asked him about the panel. About what he’d said and why he’d said it. I could’ve lied to myself, declared there wasn’t an opportune time. But the truth was I chose to skirt humiliation. What if I suggested something that might’ve been nothing? After all, I hadn’t been there. He could’ve alluded to zilch, for all I knew. Maybe Katie had just taken it as more. She was protective of him, careful with his image. Made sense she’d be overly cautious when it came to what he mentioned to the media. I didn’t doubt damage control was part of the job.

The bass line of an Abba song thumped in my chest as my brand-new Jimmy Choos touched the crimson carpet. Thank goodness for Lawson's grip on my hand. He didn't falter. Didn't lose balance. Masterfully, he smiled, waved, nodded and managed to show attentiveness toward me, all at once.

Fluid movements.

Graceful.

Professional.

I gazed up at him, my heart beating a mad staccato. *Gimme, gimme, gimme a man after midnight, won't somebody help me chase the shadows away...* The familiar lyrics crooned from the loudspeakers, a fitting soundtrack to how handsome he was, how charming and yet enigmatically unpretentious. His blinding smile flashed in the lights of a million cameras.

"Lawson! Over here!"

He stopped and pulled me in to his side, slipping an arm around my waist. "Right there." He pointed to the camera, then dropped his hand.

I looked.

Squared my shoulders.

Sucked in.

Held my breath for one, two, three beats.

Smiled.

The reporter took the shot, looked at the LCD screen, and gave a thumbs up.

"Doin' great." Lawson took my hand again. "Let's keep moving."

Unease blossomed in my stomach, and I set a hand there. "I don't know how you do this."

"No?"

"It's a lot."

"It is a lot," he acknowledged, "but they're nice, for the most part. You get a few bad apples every now and again, people poking their

noses where they don't belong. As long as they stick to the music, I'm good. No personal questions."

But the way Katie had told it, he *had* gotten personal.

A few feet ahead, two reporters with microphones beckoned. Lawson brought his lips to the curve of my ear. "Don't go anywhere," he said and released my hand to join them. Obediently, I stood to the side, hands clasped in front of me, watching as he handled his fame with the same ease as he handled everything else.

"Hey, everybody!" The female reporter, blonde, beautiful and runway-thin, wore a strapless black gown and an animated expression. "We just grabbed Lawson Hill. Lawson, you were kind enough to stop by, but you're always kind, it's so good to see you!"

"It's good to be seen, Grace, thank you. Thanks for having me."

"Now, you've been to plenty of awards shows," the male reporter cut in, "including the Grammys, which you've been nominated for and won several times over in several categories. What's it like coming here again to Vegas? Does it feel any different?"

"Well, country music's got a special spirit. The artists have an extraordinary connection with their fans and of course, you know, there's the music."

"Of course." The man laughed. "And your fans bring a lot of energy."

"They really do, yeah. I've certainly been blessed with great fans."

"Now, you're performing tonight," said the woman, Grace, and Lawson nodded. "Any hint for our listeners and viewers as to what they can expect to hear from you tonight?"

He glanced at me and warmth coiled around my heart. "Something old, something new, both with a different spin than what anyone's ever heard from me. How's that?"

"Ooh!" The reporters looked at one another, then at the camera. The man said, "You hear that, folks? Lawson Hill's got a surprise for us tonight. Well, good luck to you, man. We're looking forward to it."



Lawson thanked both of them again while my heart punched at its cage. Excitement shot up my throat. I wanted to squeal. Jump up and down. Clap like an elated child on Christmas morning. He was everything.

Beautiful.

Smart.

Kind.

Funny.

“Well?” He wrapped an arm around me, his hand on my waist. “How’d I do?”

I tipped my head back and gazed at the starless sky. Shrugging, I said, “You did all right.”

“Just all right?” He pinched my side and I squeaked. “You’d better be nice, Columbus. We’ve got a whole room to ourselves tonight and I’m not afraid to find out whether or not you’re ticklish.”

Flames licked at my cheeks. “Who says I’m staying in your room?”

“I say.” His eyes were a brilliant blue tonight and they stared boldly into mine, daring for the least bit of defiance on my part. “I didn’t bring you all the way to Vegas just to play board games.”

My jaw came unhinged.

“I mean, if we can’t tick off your bucket list of casinos, tattoo parlors and titty bars, what are we even doing?”

Laughter burst out of me, so sudden, so loud, I snorted.

Which made Lawson laugh.

Good grief, this boy. “That was not funny.”

“It was a little funny. Come on. I wanna introduce you to some people.”

*Some people* turned out to be Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Keith Urban, Nicole Kidman—for crying out loud, Nicole-freaking-Kidman. Was it possible to have a heart attack at eighteen? Because she was much more gorgeous in person. I couldn’t speak at first, but she was super chill and, soon, we were chatting about Vegas and how stupid it was that we

practically had to yell to talk. Between the crowd noise and disco music, which she agreed was interesting choice for a country music awards show, we kept having to lean into each other to hear. Which was fine by me. She smelled amazing and spoke of Lawson like a proud mama. *Such a sweet young man*, she told me twice, before Lawson tugged my hand, indicating we needed to keep moving.

Turned out Nicole wasn't the only one who complimented him. After shaking no less than fifty hands, posing for photos and watching Lawson interact with the press, fans and his peers, it became clear to me that if they were giving out a popularity award, Lawson would've won, hands down.

He had no competition.

An usher guided us to our reserved seats and I nearly lost my cool all over again. Gwen Stefani and Blake Shelton were on the front row, only two ahead of us. Beside them, Taylor Swift and her current entourage of girlfriends took up nearly every remaining seat. They were all stunning, a couple of pop singers, an actress, a model. Others, I didn't recognize.

*Don't stare, Evans. Relax.*

On either side of the catwalk-style stage, fans clustered together, some of them dancing to the music blaring from the loudspeakers, others trying to get the attention of the stars in the growing crowd.

Lawson rested our combined hands on his thigh. "I'll have to leave you in about thirty minutes." His lips touched my neck and I forgot about the room. Abandoned my nervousness and the fact I was more than a little starstruck. He was all that mattered. His lips on my skin. All that mattered. "Someone will come and sit beside you, a filler person."

"Filler person?"

"Yeah, they don't like empty seats at these things. Looks bad on television."

"Ah." His nose grazed my ear lobe and I shuddered. "You're making it really hard to behave," I whispered. "You do realize we're in public,

right?”

“I don’t care.” He kissed my neck. Once. Twice. “You should wear your hair up like this more often.”

“Oh?”

“Easier access.” His tongue touched the pulse playing a bass drum in my neck. “God, you taste good.”

I clenched my thighs together. Bit my lip to stave off a moan. The need was back, a relentless ache demanding satisfaction. Was this what it would be like for the next several weeks? Me, in a constant state of arousal, unable to process a thought without Lawson inserting himself somewhere in the equation?

“I wonder,” he murmured, “if I can make you wet for me, right here, in a room that’ll soon be packed with over sixteen thousand people.”

Shock dilated my veins. Only once had he uttered a statement so bold, in the limo on the way to his performance at the café in Nashville. *You’re gorgeous when you come.* He’d surprised me then, too. Lawson was the epitome of southern gentleman. Attentive to my wants, careful with how far he took our intimacy. But he was also a man. And he’d made no effort to hide how badly he wanted me. Oh, he’d been a good boy, for the most part. But it was always there, that need. In the way he looked at me, touched me, and the things he whispered into my ear when I least expected it.

“You may think, beautiful girl, that I don’t notice how damp your panties get when we kiss, but I do. I notice.”

I squirmed in my seat, clenched my teeth as another moan slapped at the back of my throat. The memory of earlier in the shower, when I pumped my fingers into myself, imagining he was right there, watching, slipped over my shoulder like a silken caress. My grip on his hand tightened. Inside the thin lace cups of my bra, my nipples hardened.

“Think I can?” His breath fanned the loose tendrils at the base of my skull. “Don’t close your eyes, baby.”

I couldn't close my eyes. Couldn't let on that he was seducing me with his words. People were filling in the rows in front and behind us. The room was growing louder. Lawson's thumb drew a line up and down my index finger. I allowed my gaze to travel the front row. To take in Taylor Swift's shiny, shoulder-length hair and her red lips moving as she spoke to the woman sitting next to her. I counted heads—one, two, three, four—until a pair of brown eyes framed in thick liner met mine, square-on.

I didn't know who she was.

Didn't understand why she was staring at me as if I'd shown up in a zombie costume.

Until the girl next to her said, "Hey, Jenna, you got anything?" And I knew. I knew with every fiber of my being, deep in the marrow of every bone in my body, that this was *the* Jenna.

Jenna who'd dated him for three years.

Jenna who'd left him because he was too nice.

Jenna who'd broken his heart.

Jenna whose memory had made it impossible for him to write.

Until me.

She drank me in. Weighed me as if her eyes were a set of scales and I the sand she meant to sift until she was satisfied. I had to admit, she was strikingly beautiful. The kind of effortless beauty that sprung from good genes. Her platinum locks fell down her back in the beach waves that made up fifty percent of the hair tutorials on YouTube. She wore more makeup than me, but it worked for her. Flawless brows, eyeshadow, winged liner and lashes. Glossy lips. She looked older, expensive, unattainable, and I suddenly wondered what Lawson saw in me. If this is who turned him on for three whole years, how did he find plain Harper Evans from Columbus, Ohio even remotely attractive?

And yet.

The moment he finished talking with the guy next to him, who looked too much like Thomas Rhett to be anybody but Thomas Rhett

(yes, I'd picked up quick on Nashville's elite), his face returned close to mine. His lips moved over the shell of my ear.

"Well?" he said, bringing me back to his original question.

Two could play at this game. Keeping my eyes on Jenna, I leaned into him and made a confession I never thought myself capable of, let alone capable of in a theater bursting at the seams with people. "I'm already there," I said. "In fact, I've been like this all day."

He sucked in a ragged breath.

Jenna's gaze narrowed and suddenly she wasn't so pretty anymore. Somebody should've told her the resting bitch face wasn't a good look.

"If you must know," I continued, "earlier, I took matters into my own hands, so to speak."

He exhaled the breath he'd been holding, and it skated along my neck, curled in between my breasts. His hand was gripping mine so tight the whites of his knuckles peeked through.

"Shit, Harper, that's hot." He cleared his throat. Tucked two fingers in his collar and tugged.

"Too much?"

He rubbed his free hand down his thigh. He was hard. He tried to hide it with his suitcoat, but it was too late. I'd already noticed. Thankfully, Mr. Rhett had engaged his wife in conversation and didn't.

"Well?" I said, mimicking him.

His eyes, they shifted past the second row to the first, and there it was.

Recognition.

He saw her.

And she saw him.

My heart attempted its escape again and I wished we'd been given a program so I could fan my face. How long had it been? How long since they'd last spoken? Did he wish I was her and not me? Did he feel regret? Anger? Heaven forbid, longing? Question after question assaulted my

thoughts, a mere handful of seconds altogether. But then no sooner had he noticed Jenna's presence than he broke her gaze and gifted his to me.

"You are never too much, Harper Evans." He brought my hand to his lips. "Although, I must say, I hadn't thought I'd hear those words fallin' from your mouth." His eyes shifted to that mouth, only briefly, before returning to my eyes.

"You think I'm a prude?"

"Didn't say that."

"Imagine I don't know how to make myself come?"

His smile could've solved foreign conflict, ended world hunger, stopped global warming. "Oh, I've imagined it. Many times."

I was grateful for the dimming lights that hid my blush, the music that drowned out the loudness of my heart, the presenter who came out to start the show and garnered our attention to the stage. I needed the diversion. Tough, considering Lawson was right beside me. Holding my hand. Radiating warmth and driving up my libido. Everything about him turned me on. His scent, his laugh when the host said something funny, the way his pants stretched over his thighs, the slip of white shirt peeking out from his jacket cuff, the veins in the back of his hands, the subtle rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

I had it bad.

*Real* bad.

Three awards, two performances that were out-of-this-world incredible and he whispered into my ear, "Wish me luck, Columbus."

"Oh! Good luck." Of its own volition, my hand went to his face as he moved to stand and he bent, pressed a kiss to my lips. "I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will," I said, the truth. He'd done nothing but amaze the hell out of me since we met. "Knock 'em dead."

I tracked his broad shoulders as he allowed a man with a headset and clipboard to guide him backstage. A millisecond later, a guy in a tux took Lawson's seat.

He nodded in greeting.

“Hey,” I returned. Lawson’s absence sank heavily in my gut.

“Enjoying the show?”

“Yeah. Yes.”

“First time?”

“It’s that obvious?”

He smiled. “A little.”

I didn’t request an elaboration. For one reason or another, my uncelebrity status stuck out, which didn’t surprise me as much as it seared the edges of my ego. I showed up on Lawson Hill’s arm, held his hand, posed for photos with him. That had to count for something. Yeah, sure, his ex was here, which was...to use Lawson’s word from earlier with the reporters...*special*. Every handful of seconds, she’d glance back at me and I didn’t know where to look.

Maybe that was the *obvious* Random Filler-Guy spoke of. The obviousness of Lawson and his ex-girlfriend being in the same room when they weren’t together anymore. The obviousness of him bringing another girl, yours truly, to a big-time awards ceremony. The obviousness of Jenna throwing curious hate stares at me as if she were practicing for an archery contest.

*Quit making up stories, Evans*, my conscience ordered.

The legal secretary in my brain adjusted her glasses. *But there is an overwhelming preponderance of evidence. People recognize their own kind. Lawson belongs to them. You don’t.*

Conscience scoffed. *People belong to themselves. Put the gin down and get real.*

Two more awards were presented, winners announced, acceptance speeches given. By the time the next presenter strolled onto the stage, I was almost too wound up, too antsy to notice that it was Easton Cane, the guy I’d met that night at The Shed. The same guy that’d forked over his White Sox ballcap, so Lawson could attempt (and ultimately fail) to disguise himself.

He looked ridiculous-handsome in his navy-blue suit, sans ballcap, of course, and silver tie.

“Good evening,” he said as the cheers died down. “When I first met this next performer, he gave me some of the best advice I’ve ever gotten since I’ve been in the music industry. He said that when it comes to songwriting, it’s best to heed Thoreau’s advice. *Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.* And that’s what he does with his music. He gives us truth. Ladies and gentlemen, I’m honored to introduce our next performer, a multi-Grammy winning artist who’s not only the nicest damn guy I know, but a damn good friend, too. Please put your hands together for Lawson Hill!”



## chapter sixteen

THE REVERB OF HIS guitar pulsed in my chest. Fans and guests clapped, whistled and hollered. Lawson walked up to the microphone to his drummer's intro and the other guys in the band joined in, already in their places. He smiled, and the room's energy spiked faster than a thermometer thrust into boiling water.

He'd removed his jacket and tie, rolled up his sleeves, unbuttoned his shirt halfway down his chest. The textbook image of a hot country star.

The song wasn't one I'd heard from him before. Not online or via music app, nor the many times I'd watched him practice at home, whether by himself or with his band. The crowd listened, speechless, enthralled. This was new. New to me, new to them. Lyrics poured from his mouth, a smooth-as-silk melody about two people in a secret relationship.

A whirlwind encounter, shared smiles, heated touches.

*Moving too fast, but it feels so right, so good, baby, baby you're driving me crazy.*

Emotion speared me in the gut, then spiraled like a beanstalk up, up, up into my neck and face. Had he written a song about us? It was almost too much to process. Especially right there in the middle of a crowded theater, chockful of celebrities and screaming fans. The harmonies were

beautiful. The kind that sunk in, demand pause and appreciation. His lyrics read like a diary, an account of our time together.

*Or maybe just some random guy's time with some random girl*, I told myself. Because the possibility existed that I was hallucinating. That I'd created a beautiful, vivid fiction in my own mind. One I did not want to let go of anytime soon. It was too precious, too exciting.

Regardless.

One significant truth stood out among all others—and there were many.

He was taking hold of me, this man.

He'd planted himself inside, rooted me into his world, and there was no going back. When he sang, my heart sang with him. When he strummed his guitar—he'd chosen his vintage white Fender Stratocaster—the blood in my veins caught fire.

Two verses and a final chorus and he broke into a guitar solo that garnered more whistles, more whoops and calls. The drums picked up. He moved up the catwalk and the fans lost their minds. Within seconds, everyone was on their feet, clapping to the beat, cheering him on.

Katie had instructed me to smile until my face hurt. I hadn't realized just how involuntary that task would be.

I'd never smiled so wide in my life.

His fingers skated across the fretboard; every note hit with master precision. Some of the guys in the audience were shaking their heads in amazement. The fans around the stage thrust their hands in the air, screaming, and Lawson catered to them, making eye contact, leaning forward as he made impossible runs on the guitar. At one point, he looked up, and our gazes locked. He watched me, never breaking rhythm. Deep, that gaze. Penetrating. And his smile? Gosh. I don't think I could've ever gotten enough of his smile. He loved this, fed off the crowd's energy like a rose opening its face to the sun. When the song came to an end, he leapt into the air so high I gasped, then laughed when he landed on the last note.

Un-freaking-believable.

But he wasn't finished.

The band transitioned into *Maelstrom* and I had the sudden thought he could've taken over the awards ceremony for the night, and no one would've minded. Everyone was up. Everyone was dancing and clapping. Gwen Stefani and Taylor Swift sang every word, for all the world as if they were a couple of tour rats who'd hadn't missed a single show. They danced next to each other, their hips and arms swaying, as Blake Shelton's shoulders shook with laughter. No one, it seemed, was impervious to Lawson's charm. To his raw talent. To the aura that followed him around wherever he went.

He closed the chart-topping song with another guitar solo that left the room in raucous cheers. People leaned into one another, smiling, expressing their amazement.

But it was Jenna I noticed as Lawson bowed, blew a kiss to the fans and left the stage.

She wasn't smiling. Neither was she frowning. From this angle, I could only make out her profile, but emotion had vacated the premises. Indeed, hers was a face practiced in the art of mask-wearing. Celebrities were like that, I guessed. Slipping from one persona into another with less trouble than one changes his shirt. She stared after Lawson, stared still following his exit, when everyone began to take their seats.

One of her friends tugged her hand and she sat, reaching back to smooth her hair.

Twenty-something minutes passed before he appeared at the end of the aisle, murmuring *excuse me, thanks*, as he squeezed past knees, hands reaching out to touch him, and utterances of approval to reclaim his seat.

He stopped short, his eyes locking with those of the guy who had taken his seat. Recognition registered on Lawson's face. For a moment, they stared at one another, until finally Lawson stuck out his hand.

“Thanks, man,” he said as Filler-Guy tentatively accepted the gesture. “She behave herself?” He winked at me.

What was happening?

A muscle ticked in Filler-Guy’s jaw. Then he came to, said, “Don’t know about all that,” as if they were reading lines from a play and it was his turn. “Hey, great performance, bro. Really solid.”

“Thanks.”

“Those riffs...man. Wish I could get that kind of sound out of my —”

“Thanks.”

Filler-Guy blinked at the interruption. “Well. Y’all enjoy the rest of your evening. Looking forward to the next album, by the way.” Pause. “It’s been a while.”

Lawson didn’t respond and Filler-Guy took that as his cue to leave.

Clearing his throat, he tugged his forelock as if accustomed to tipping a hat. “Good luck, Miss.”

*Good luck?* “Thanks.”

“Good. Luck.” Lawson sank into his chair, set his elbow to the armrest. Rubbed his upper lip. He stared straight ahead, unblinking, as if he were working out a quantum physics problem.

“Hey.” I nudged his arm. “You okay?” I’d never seen him like this before. When he didn’t answer, I said, “Lawson?”

He blinked. Then his gaze met mine and, I couldn’t explain it, but it was like the tension instantaneously ebbed.

“Yeah.” He sat up straighter, laced our fingers. Kissed my knuckles. “You look beautiful tonight. Did I tell you that already?”

My brow pulled. The storm may have receded from the shoreline, but an aftermath lingered. Scattered debris, something. Something he wasn’t allowing me to see for the wall he’d gotten way too good at erecting when he needed to.

But why did he need to? This was me. Ordinary, safe, no-strings-attached me. Hadn't I earned his trust and he, mine? Hadn't we gotten past the reactive need to build walls and keep each other at arm's length?

Then again...*fast*.

I licked my lips. "An amen."

"Right." A dimpled half-smile. A gentle squeeze of my hand. "An amen."

After the ceremony, Lawson didn't want to linger. He expressed his thanks to those who reached out to him on a job well done on stage, but only because those well-wishers were on our way out.

"I ordered an Uber." Lawson guided me through the exit doors, his hand at the small of my back. "Thought maybe we could grab a bite to eat, maybe show you some of the sites."

"There's no after-party?" Because there was always an after-party. The news talked about them the next day, people posted photos on social media.

He paused by the curb. Gazed down at me with amusement. "Several, but I figured you wouldn't be interested."

I wasn't.

I didn't care where we went.

I just wanted to be with him.

"Are *you* interested?" I asked.

Beside us, the passenger window of a Toyota Camry rolled down. "Mr. Hill?"

Lawson gestured for the driver to wait. His eyes were still on me. "Everything I'm interested in is right here in front me."

"Wow." *Wow*. I slipped my arms inside his jacket, around his waist. He was so warm, his shirt slightly damp from sweating on stage. "That has got to be the cheesiest line I've ever heard."

"Really?" He arched a brow. "That can't be true."

I laughed.

“Because I’m sure I can do much better.” He opened the back door of the car.

“Oh?” I ducked inside, scooting over to make room for him. “What do you have a giant book of pickup lines or something?”

He shut the door, leaned in and kissed me. Just a gentle press of his lips to mine, but I felt that kiss everywhere. “Maybe.” Grinning, he sat back, fastened his seatbelt. I followed suit. “I’ve got one for you.” He tugged at his collar. “Know what this shirt’s made of?”

“Oh my gosh.” Laughter bubbled inside my chest. “What?”

“Boyfriend material.”

I burst out laughing. Whatever had happened after his performance, wherever dark place he’d gone to, he was back now. Just Lawson. My Lawson.

He gripped the driver’s headrest. “Hey, man. Any good hole-in-the-wall joints around here?”

The driver glanced at us, smiled. “I’m from here, Mr. Hill. Everything worth knowing is someplace hole-in-the-wall. What did you have in mind?”

“Burgers, maybe. Something lowkey.”

“You got it.”

Sitting back, Lawson stretched an arm over the seat. “Now. Where was I?”

Gosh, this man. “You were telling me about your shirt, maybe?”

“Ah, that’s right. Hey, do you have an extra heart?”

“I’m afraid to ask. Why do you need an extra heart?”

His head canted. “Because mine’s been stolen.”

A small diner off the strip served burgers, fries and mile-high lemon meringue pie. We ate our fill and then some. Lawson paid the bill and I grabbed one of their paper menus for a keepsake. Then he took me to see the dancing Fountains of Bellagio. Water and mist swayed and jetted into the air to Lady Gaga’s *Bad Romance*. I didn’t suppose my eyes could’ve gotten any wider. I’d read about the lake and the

*choreographed sprinkler system on steroids*, to quote one author. But it was far more spectacular in person. The lights were stunning, the streams of water twirling and leaping like real dancers. I'd no sooner rubbed my upper arms against the chill of the night air than I felt the weight of Lawson's suit jacket on my shoulders. His arms wrapped around me from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder.

I was crazy about this man.

"Well?" he asked.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"I don't gamble. Never understood the appeal. But I always look forward to coming to Vegas, because of this. The rush of the water, the lights, the music."

"I love it." I turned, locked my arms around his neck. He palmed the small of my back. "Thank you."

"For?"

"For bringing me along. This is more than I could've ever imagined, although I'm not sure what I imagined."

"Burgers and pie, no doubt. I really should've taken you to a better restaurant, especially since it's your first time and—"

I pressed my lips to his to shut him up. "Not on your life," I said. "I've loved every moment."

"And the performance?" It was the first time he'd asked.

I drew in a sharp breath through my teeth, bopped my head from side to side.

"No?" He looked surprised. Maybe a tiny bit concerned.

Teasing him was too much fun, but even I didn't have it in me to keep up the ruse.

"Lawson," I said, "you were amazing. Okay? There. I said it. A-MA-ZING."

A gorgeous grin split his face. "Yeah?"

"I mean, for a country boy from Louisiana."

"Of course."

“They have a category for that, right?”

“Don’t think so, but maybe they should.”

“They really should.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Hill?” someone said, and we parted, both of us looking for who’d spoken.

Nearly two hours since the end of the awards show, and no one had bothered him. Sure, he’d garnered stares, giggles and whispers behind hands, but people had given him his privacy.

A woman with a little girl at her side smiled, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Hi, I’m so sorry, but my daughter, she loves you and we weren’t sure it was you—well, she was sure, I didn’t believe her, but then she reminded me you were here for the awards.”

She was still rambling when Lawson let go of my hand and sank to his haunches, eye-level with the little girl. “Hi.” He stuck his hand out, smiled. “I’m Lawson. What’s your name?”

Big brown eyes beamed at him, followed by a toothy grin. “Amanda.” Her voice was so small, so precious, I couldn’t suppress a smile of my own.

“Amanda,” he repeated. “That’s a pretty name. How old are you, Amanda?”

“Six. My birthday was yesterday.”

“No way.” He looked genuinely shocked.

She giggled. “Yep!”

“Well, happy belated birthday, Amanda.”

“Thanks.”

“When I turned six years old, my mom got me a baby goat.”

“Aww!”

“Yeah, but I wanted another guitar, so...” He shrugged.

“My mommy got me a Barbie dream house.”

“A Barbie dream house!” He acted surprised and she laughed.  
“That is so cool!”



“Yeah!”

“Do you mind if she gets a photo?” Amanda’s mom asked, holding up her phone.

Lawson didn’t take his eyes off of the little girl. “Can I get a picture with you?”

Amanda nodded and moved close to his side.

He put his arm around her. “Okay, smile real big.”

They both did and Amanda’s mom snapped a couple of photos. The surrounding crowd had begun to take notice. More and more people stopped their conversations, stopped gazing at the fountain to stare at him and the young fan.

“Awesome. Hey, can I get a hug?” He opened his arms and Amanda instantly went to him. Lawson wasn’t a large man, no, but she was tiny by comparison. Her doll-like hands pressed into his shoulders as he embraced her. “Thank you so much.”

He stood. Offered his hand to Amanda’s mom. “I’m Lawson, by the way.”

Her brows snapped together, and she laughed, shaking his hand. “Oh, I know who you are. We listen to you every day in car line. I can’t tell you enough how much your music has meant to her. To both of us. I just can’t believe she finally got to meet you.”

“Well, I appreciate the support.” Gazing down at Amanda, he presented her with his fist and she automatically bumped it with hers. “Have fun with your cool dream house, okay? And be good for your mama.”

“I will!”

His eyes found mine, and I knew. If one person had the courage to approach him, it was only a matter of time before the evening turned into a giant meet and greet.

He was ready to leave.

We took a cab back to the hotel. I was antsier than a kindergartner on picture day. I fidgeted with the hem of my dress. Pushed my cuticles

back with my thumbnail. Why was anyone's guess. The show, the meal, the fountain, the little girl with stars in her eyes. It was a lot to take in. Wonderful, yes, of course it was. I'd had the best time of my life, and every moment of it spent with Lawson. But he was larger than life and yet, in that same breath, quick to sink right back to his roots. Or to the concrete, as it were, to the level of a six-year-old girl who asked for a piece of his time.

Lawson paid the cabbie and nodded to a security guard at the doors of the hotel. "You okay?" he asked as he guided us toward the elevators. The guard walked at a short distance behind. "Not too tired?"

I threaded my fingers with his. "I'm more than okay. And, no, I'm not too tired. Actually, I'm worried I may not sleep tonight, the excitement's been overwhelming."

"Yeah?"

"A little."

"Hmm."

We made it to the room without issue, Lawson scanning his key card and nodding to the security officer with a respectful, "Thanks, man. Have a good night."

"You, too."

Upon entering the room, my phone lying face down on the chest of drawers caught my eye. I'd opted out of a clutch for the night, figuring I wouldn't need it, anyway. Which had been true; I hadn't. But as a millennial baby, of course my phone was almost always attached to my body. I went for it. What if Dad had called or texted? I hadn't talked to him in almost two weeks, and I was beginning to get a little worried.

"Wait." Lawson's hand on my arm stopped me.

I turned, blinked up at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, I..." He hesitated. If hadn't known better, I would've said he was nervous. "Can we just...you know."

I laughed. The look on his face was too amusing. "What?"

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out his phone. Held it up, used his thumb to switch it to silent. "Give these up for one night?"

"What if someone called or texted?" *Like my dad.*

"I'll spare you the suspense." He placed his phone beside mine, face-down. "Savana texted about twenty times."

I popped my hand over my mouth. "She's going to be so mad at us."

"She'll get over it. Always does. Impossible for her to stay mad at me for too long. Brother-sister thing."

"But you're not related."

"Might as well be."

"Right. Well. She may not be so lenient with me."

"Now, there you're wrong." He reached for me and I went to him, an involuntary action that wouldn't be the last where he was concerned. "You're with me now, Columbus. Same rules apply all the way around."

I didn't think that was true, but it was a nice sentiment. He had a way of making me believe anything he said. "We'll have to give her a full report in the morning. Where's Katie?"

He pressed a kiss to my brow, another to my temple, and I dragged in a shaky breath. "Already in her room. She's a lightweight."

"And yet she keeps up with you."

A kiss to my cheek. A kiss to my chin. "That, she does. But the real question is...can you?"

"Keep up with you?"

A masculine grunt and his lips brushed my lips and my breaths turned shallow and I thought for a split second my knees were about to buckle, but they didn't.

*Thank goodness, they didn't.*

"Probably not." It was nothing more than a whisper, stolen, as his mouth took mine.

## chapter seventeen

I KISSED HIM BACK. His jacket fell off my shoulders and my hands surged up his chest to his neck. Marvelous, the warmth I found there. He was hot. So very hot and every part of me ached for him, to crawl inside, revel in that delicious, masculine heat. He backed me up against the nearest wall, kissed me hard and deep. I clung to him, weak, desperate, sure that if I didn't feel more of him—*more, God, please, more*—I might've died from the relentless ache between my legs.

*I wonder if I can make you wet for me, right here, in a room that'll soon be packed with over sixteen thousand people.*

His words from earlier in the evening fueled my desire as his lips traced soft, open-mouthed kisses down my jaw to the hypersensitive line of my neck. My heart began to beat with anxious intensity. My fingers speared into his hair, holding him to me. He was strong, his every move calculated, driven by lean muscle and tightly wound need. For half a breath, I imagined what he'd be capable of once we're in the bedroom, if this...*this* was only the beginning of what I'd fantasized, what I'd wanted weeks of touching and kissing to lead to.

*You may think, beautiful girl, that I don't notice how damp your panties get when we kiss, but I do. I notice.*

Desire ripped through me, and I twisted my head, our cheeks brushing, and nipped at his earlobe.

An animalistic growl stirred in his chest, one that vibrated through my body and had me practically climbing him to get closer. His fingers answered my plea, digging into my hip, pulling me flush against him. His hips ground into mine and I let out a gasp that echoed off the walls of the suite.

He murmured, “Shit, darlin’, you taste so good,” in his southern drawl and it was the hottest, most erotic thing I’d ever heard.

Especially when he punctuated it with another frantic claiming of my lips.

His fingers tugged at my dress, first the skirt, then the zipper, followed by the clasp of my bra. Space between us didn’t exist, but I helped him as best I could, shimmying my hips until my gold dress and the bra beneath fell in a heap of fabric at my feet.

He drew back, his hands resting on my hips, just above the thin band of my underwear. I try to catch my breath. To tell myself not to be embarrassed as he took me in. Desire-darkened eyes assessed, appraised, paused for a second on my breasts, before moving over the plane of my stomach.

“Harper.” He touched the skin below my navel. “You are so beautiful. So...soft. I never imagined...” He didn’t finish. He swallowed the words as if they were lost to him.

He sank to his knees and I gasped, alarmed. “What are you—?”

“Out of these.” He tapped the stiletto of one of my heels.

The thought to disobey didn’t even cross my mind.

Trying not to tremble, I stepped out of them, and he said, “Good girl.”

Hazily, I wondered if I should’ve been offended. No one had ever spoken to me like this. *Good girl*. Should I have been insulted? If so, why was I so turned on? Why did the fantasy of him giving orders and me obeying like a *good girl* all of a sudden seem like the greatest, most stimulating idea since the very first idea in the whole universe?

His gaze roamed over my legs, and he gripped my ankles, slid his hands up my calves and around my knees. Thank goodness I shaved earlier.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

“Oh my gosh.” The statement whooshed out of me as if I’d been holding my breath the entire time. Maybe I had.

His head tilted back. “Are you okay?” Calloused fingers moved further up my leg. “I can stop, if you want me to.”

I shook my head, hair scrubbing against the door.

He pressed a kiss to my left thigh. Another to my right. His hair brushed my center and a rush of pleasure skyrocketed through my body. When I looked down at him through the valley between my breasts, tight and swollen, the nipples peaked, he gazed up at me with an expression so fierce I nearly lost my breath.

His fingers hooked in the waistband of my underwear. “Now’s the time to tell me *no*, if you don’t wanna do this.”

I licked my lips. “I want to. Please, Lawson.”

A smooth arch of a brow. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

He tugged my underwear down the length of my legs, allowed me to step out of them.

And then his tongue...

Holy mother of—*oh oh oh*, his tongue slid along the folds of my sex. Without warning. He tasted me. Shifted my entire world off its axis. I bit back a cry, because, *holy crap*, his mouth felt amazing. The feel of his warm breath, the silky softness of his tongue sliding along my slit. I shuddered. Gasped. The pleasure was so sharp, so consuming, I got a little lightheaded.

But then he rose, and I had to bite my lip to stop a whine of protest. “What are you doing?”

His hands slipped beneath my knees and he lifted me. My legs wrapped around his waist. He was hard—so hard and powerful, and the

pressure of his erection right there where I wanted him so badly had me seeing stars.

“Okay?” His eyes were blue fire staring into mine.

I nodded vigorously. “Yes.”

He moved, kissing me, my arms around his neck, his hands cradling my back. Depositing me to the bed, he flipped me over, face down on the mattress.

*O-kay.* That, I did not expect.

For a moment I wondered if this was about to turn terribly bad. I’d read the stories online, watched the news, heard girls in the restroom talk about date-rape when I was still in high school and much too busy to go out with a guy, much less sleep with him. The night started out great: a party at someone’s house, music, drinking. Girl meets good-looking boy who says nice words and then, boom, she was underneath him, not knowing what the hell was going on. *Positive* she didn’t bank on being forced against her will.

But Lawson hadn’t forced me. In fact, he’d stopped and made sure I consented before proceeding any further.

So.

I laid there. Unsure if I was relieved because I couldn’t see what he was doing or petrified, because I couldn’t see what he was doing.

Unable to decide, my eyes squeezed shut. I braced myself. For gentleness, for roughness, for whatever he wanted to do, because damn my stupid female libido, I told him *yes*. And then *please*. Those words actually came out of my mouth.

“Look at you.” One of his hands settled on my back.

My eyes popped open. Tentatively, his other hand joined the first and he let loose a soft exhale, caressing down my back from the base of my neck to the slope of my ass. “Like silk.” He followed the length of my spine back up again, murmuring softly. “Relax, Harper. Breathe. I just want to touch you.”

Relax? *Relax?* Impossible. Before I could force myself to breathe, as instructed, both his hands were on my ass, squeezing, stroking. The bed dipped, springs squeaking, and I felt the plump push of his lips as he kissed me there. One side, then the other, and back again.

His tongue darted out to taste and I yelped.

Then blushed *because* I yelped. *You're such an idiot, Evans. Can't even be cool while the hottest guy in the world is kissing your ass.*

He laughed softly. "No need for theatrics, Columbus. I won't hurt you."

Gently, he flipped me onto back. I couldn't begin to explain how erotic it was being naked while he was still clothed. He was mouthwateringly handsome. Sexier than any man I'd ever seen in my whole life. How on Earth did a man like this set eyes on me and think: *her?* Forget I was leaving for college in a couple of months. This man looked at me—me, Harper Evans, textbook shy-girl-nerd-bookworm and he saw...something. Something more. *Someone* worth exploring.

With one knee braced between my legs, he sat back on his heels and loosened his tie, his eyes never leaving mine.

This was going to happen.

This was *really* going to happen. No turning back. No getting around the inevitable.

His agile fingers began to unfasten the buttons of his shirt and I sat up, suddenly needing to feel useful. He accommodated me by lifting his elbows and I tugged his shirttails from his waistband.

At the same time, he leaned forward and pushed his thigh between my legs.

*Oh, sweet lord—that—*

*That feels—*

A breathy, high-pitched moan escaped my throat, followed by a wash of mortification that set my face on fire. He'd have a wet spot on his pants because of me. Because I couldn't control—



He applied pressure and my breath hitched, teeth snagged and bit my lower lip. My eyes rolled back in my head and I braced my palms to the bed.

“You like that,” he said rather than asked.

“Mmm.” The closest thing to a word I could muster.

“Good. Let’s find out what else you like.”

My body remembered the weight of him, the perfection of his hard lines forming to my softer ones. He bore down on me fast, pushing me to the white down comforter. His head lowered. Mouth closed over my left nipple and my eyelashes fluttered like hummingbird wings. A bolt of hot pleasure shot between my legs and I clenched around him, ground against his thigh like a preteen making out on the couch.

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

He abandoned the left breast for the right and my lungs stopped working. Blearily, I was aware of the intoxicating sensation of warm skin tickling my belly. He’d taken off his shirt. How had I missed that? What was I doing? Was I so far over the edge of desire I’d lost short-term memory?

Lawson’s hand lifted and he began to massage the breast his mouth had just left. Gentle, rolling tugs of my nipple that sent electric jolts straight to the very core of my body. I struggled against him. Restless. Eager. Wanting more. Wanting him *now*, for the love of babies, puppies and Milk Duds, what did a girl have to do to—

His fingers left their place of torture, swept around the front of my body, dipped between our bodies. Low, lower and lower still. He sought and found the engorged bud, the lone source of the ache ravaging my entire body. And began circling with expert pressure.

One of my hands gripped his forearm. The other dug greedily into his hair. Sensations cascaded over me, a waterfall of push and pull that drove me higher and higher toward that glorious summit I wanted so badly.

The abrasion of his five o’clock shadow against my breast.

His lips, tongue and teeth teasing my nipple.

His fingers, taking every involuntary arch of my hips in stride, slipping in and out through drenched folds, his thumb rolling and gliding over and over and over.

Never, not once since I learned how to pleasure myself at fourteen, had I felt anything close to this. To Lawson worshipping my body as if this was all he was ever meant to do. As if we, each of us, were made for the sole pleasure of the other. When he murmured beneath his breath and shifted his body off mine, I was too weak to argue. My senses blurred together: the scent of cologne mingled with sweat, the taste of him on my tongue, the rustle of a wrapper, the raggedness of his breath, a rush of air across my thighs.

*More*, I tried to say aloud but couldn't find the lung capacity. *Please more. I'm nearly there. You can't give me all that, just to take it away.*

He slid inside me, and a groan of ecstasy wrenched from my chest.

He stilled, waiting, I could only guess, for me to beg him: *Stop, wait, no I can't do this*, but there was no way I would've taken this back. Not then, not ever. With every breath, I inhaled him, felt him, and I couldn't fathom wanting to be anywhere else, with *anyone* else.

Our bodies were melded together, his chest smashing my breasts. His fingers dawdled in my hair. We were joined. Deeply. Our hips were touching, and his face hovered above mine, our breaths colliding like two people who had just come up for air after minutes of being underwater.

He felt incredible, indescribable.

Complete.

It was too much to wrap my brain around at once.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"I'm not hurting you?"

I shook my head. "Just trying to figure out when you took off your pants and put on a condom."

He laughed. Dipped his head. Kissed my neck. “You feel so good. So warm and tight.”

“Um. Thanks?”

Another airy chuckle. “I take it you’ve never been told that before.”

“No.”

“Never?”

I chewed my lip.

And told him the truth. “There was never another time to.”

He pulled back. His eyes searched mine. “Harper.”

My heart was beating so fast. “Yes?”

“This isn’t...please tell me I’m not...” He blinked and, I don’t know why, but my eyes welled. “Harper?”

“Are you disappointed?”

“What? No. No, of course not.” He kissed my forehead, inhaled deeply against my skin. “You could never be a disappointment to me, baby. I just wish you would’ve told me. I would’ve gone slower, tried to be gentler or...something.”

“You’re perfect, Lawson.” I framed his face in my hands, made him look at me. “Please don’t stop.”

I didn’t have to tell him twice.

He began to move. Slowly. Rubbing and stoking the sensitive part of me inflamed with need. My legs clutched instinctively around his hips as he set a pace as old as time. As all the senses he awakened earlier writhed back to life.

His hand gripped my thigh, and he hiked my leg high and tight against his waist.

He thrust slow. Hard. Deep. I moved with him, mimicking his rhythm. The scent of him, of *us*, was everywhere: earth, leather and the Chanel perfume the makeup artist had spritzed on my wrists as a final touch. And sweat—*our* sweat, mingled together, skin to skin.

That heady fragrance would forever be imbedded in my memory.

His mouth opened on my neck, suckling, and I arched against him, meeting him stroke for stroke. He held me fast, hard. One hand gripped my shoulder from behind, the other adhered to my thigh. It was heart-wrenching. Soul-crushing. Even in the dark of the hotel suite, light flashed behind my eyes like a spray of falling stars. My legs shook and clenched around his body. Mouth fell open in a silent cry. *Oh—yes, finally, God—oh, oh ohhh—*

He pumped into me again. And again. Deeper than I thought possible. Once, twice, and he cried out. A marvelous, feral growl of completion. His blunt fingernails dug into my ass, almost painfully, certain to leave a bruise, but I didn't care.

The world paused. Stillness moved over the room, quiet as a low, swirling mist. All that remained was us. Cemented together. Struggling for lung capacity. Pleasure exploding like fireworks over Downtown Columbus on the Fourth of July.

The rhythmic pulse of the orgasm thumped on and on and *on*.

He murmured in the hollow of my neck, his breath hot and moist.

"You know," I breathed, "that southern accent of yours is pretty sexy."

"Yeah?"

"Mmm."

He shifted. Raised his head. A single drop of sweat fell from his temple, rolled down my cheek. "Well, darlin', I can just about southern-a-fy anything you can think of."

"Is that so?"

He used his thumb to smooth the furrows etched in my brow. "Try me."

"Hmm. French fries."

"French fries?" The faintest smile ticked one corner of his mouth, more sensual than I could readily describe. Lowering his head, he brushed a kiss to the outer corner of my eye. "Would you like fries with that, darlin'?"

I laughed, my stomach bouncing against his. Our sweaty skin clung like magnets and fleetingly, I thought that, too, was something I wouldn't soon forget. The feel of our bodies fused together as one, his chest pressed against mine.

He slid his nose down the bridge of mine, then kissed me, deep and slow. Outside, rain pattered lightly against the windows. My fingers traced the length of his spine, down to the groove of his bottom. I drew a pattern.

He smiled against my lips. "Amen."

"Amen," I whispered, confirming the letters I'd sketched on his skin.

A deep sigh stirred in his chest. Contentment, maybe. But no. Eagerness. Need. We were still connected, body to body, and already he was hardening inside me. I wondered how many times we could possibly do this before we both gave out or died of dehydration.

"I should've warned you." His words feathered near my ear.

"Warned me?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

He pushed his lips against the pulse in my neck. "That I've wanted you since the moment I first saw you."

Chills surfaced all over my body. "Really?"

"Really."

*Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.* "And why would you need to warn me about that?"

He didn't respond.

He didn't have to.

The answer was clear as he begun to thrust in and out, lazily now, as if we had all the time in the world.

## chapter eighteen

I LOST COUNT of how many times I came. Or how many times I'd made him come. He'd discarded what I imagined was a whole box of used condoms in the bedside trashcan. Good thing we'd both thought to bring them. You know, just in case.

Hours had gone by without concept of what hour it was, exactly. He'd thrown a pillow on top of the clock radio. The curtains were drawn. Our phones were on silent. No one had come to the door. I wasn't sure when exhaustion had pulled us both into sleep.

I woke with heaviness in my body, soreness between my legs. The vestiges of a hangover lingered, but neither of us had drank a drop of liquor. I felt satiated, happy. I hadn't bled, a fact for which I was grateful, though I was certain Lawson wouldn't have been put off by it, if I had. He'd been wonderful. Starving and rough one moment, tender the next. As each orgasm came and waned, I wanted more. More of him. More of us.

I pushed myself up. Brushed the hair out of my face. He'd removed my ponytail elastic, tossed it across the room like an Olympic disc. We'd laughed at that. Then kissed for minutes before he was inside me again.

Beside me, Lawson lay sleeping on his stomach. Arms tucked under a pillow. What little light filtered into the room highlighted his back muscles, the smooth skin over his shoulders, the natural blond in his

hair. Even in heavy slumber, he was beautiful. A great choice for my first, I thought, and smiled, because, damn, I didn't think losing my virginity would be this perfect. Most girls' stories could've sprung from a horror film. It wasn't any wonder I'd held out for the right moment.

Lawson was more than right.

He was the one.

In those seconds, marked by the steady beat of my heart, I realized, with sound vibrato, that I loved this man.

I loved him.

I clutched the sheets to my chest, braced for the onslaught of chastisement that would hit in rapid succession once my brain told my fear what I'd thought. But the words of warning never came. Firm reminders that I'd landed a killer scholarship, that I was leaving the country soon. Too soon. That my father wasn't even here, nor had I heard from him except for a few short texts. That I didn't have time to nurture a relationship, if this was a relationship, which I desperately wanted it to be.

God, how I wanted it to be.

Naked, I eased out of bed and padded to the bathroom. Relieved myself. Checked the mirror and gasped. My lipstick, or what had been my lipstick, was smeared up the side of one cheek. Mascara remnants darkened the skin underneath my eyes. I looked like a toddler had attempted to replicate a Picasso on my face. No way could I have wiped off the remnants, started with a clean slate and recreated what a team of professionals had done the night before. I chose the clean slate, washed my face with the soap the spa had given me. Then took another gander.

A marginal improvement. But then there was the hickey below my ear. And the one above my collarbone. Another marked the upper slope of my left breast. I was pretty sure fancy spa soap wouldn't remove any of those.

I grabbed one of the white robes provided by the hotel and decided to face the reality of my phone.

10:03 a.m. Which meant it was already past noon in Nashville. I hadn't slept this late since...

Never.

I'd never slept this late. Dad had brought me up from birth to be an early riser. *Lose an hour in the morning, he'd say, and you'll be looking for it all day.*

But clocks lost importance when I was with Lawson.

Savana had texted several times, but I'd expected no less. She might've been more excited about Vegas than I was. Might've. Smiling, I texted her back: *Everything's great. He did wonderful. Really killed it. Not sure when we'll be back, but I'll be in touch.*

Bubbles instantly appeared.

I'd missed two phone calls. Both from a Columbus area code. I didn't recognize the number. Then again, it was an election year. Unrecognizable numbers weren't exactly an enigma.

Sighing, I texted Dad. *Need to talk. Please call ASAP. Everything's okay. Love you.*

Savana's text finally came through. *Sister, you know Chris and I watched and yaaasss he was AMAZING OH MY GOSH! It's all anybody can talk about around here this morning—wait until y'all see the news and the papers. You looked gorgeous in that dress, by the way!!! Chris has been eyeing that thing for weeks, but even she said it looked much better on you! <3*

*Thank you.* 🥰 I clicked send and my eyes landed on Lawson. Still here. Still asleep

Or so I'd thought.

His heavy-lidded gaze found me. A lopsided grin played on his lips. "What are you doin'? Come back to bed, baby."

"Just doing the adult thing and checking my phone." But I set it down and joined him on the bed. "Hi," I whispered, running my fingers through his hair. "I didn't want to wake you."

He rubbed his eyes. "Everything okay?"



“Yep. Savana texted, of course, and I told her we were fine and that we’d let her know when we were back in Nashville.”

“Did she see the performance?”

“Yep. Said she loved it. Chris, too.”

“Good.”

“Were you worried?”

“I wrote and performed new material.” Even in the dimly lit room, the warmth in his blue eyes made me tremble with desire. “I’m always a little worried what people will think, how they’ll react, if they’ll hate it so bad the entire world issues a cease and desist on my music.”

“Sounds terrible.”

He gave me a pitiful expression. “It really is.”

“Just an underappreciated, brilliant boy. Burdened by talent he never asked for.”

“I know, right?” Charming to the bone, regardless he was only half-awake. He jutted his chin at my robe, quirked an eyebrow. “What’s this?”

I looked down at the fluffy white robe, then at him. “What?”

“You are in way too many clothes, woman.”

Warmth swept up my spine. “Is that so?”

He rose to an elbow, tugged at the robe’s terrycloth belt. The material gaped open. Electricity coursed through my veins. There were no mysteries left between us, no reason for discomfort. Head to toe, he’d seen all of me, and he wasted no time in pushing the robe off my shoulders.

It fell to my elbows, bared my breasts.

“Much better.”

“You know I can’t just be naked all the time.”

“Don’t see why not.” He leaned forward, swept his tongue over a peaked nipple. Kissed it. “These are much too pretty to hide.”

“Ah ha. So, I should just walk around topless all the time. For anyone and everyone to see.”

His eyes lifted. “I didn’t say that. Just saying you should feel free to walk around as naked as you like when we get back home. In the house, of course. When it’s just you and me.”

*When it’s just you and me.*

But it wasn’t just me and him, was it? Even if I wasn’t going away, which I was, but if—if I wasn’t, we could never be a normal couple. There would always be people who wanted a piece of him. Always a show to get to, a photo shoot, an interview, a tour bus that took him away for months at a time. Playing house with him? Sure, it was fun. A thrilling fantasy I never would’ve dreamed of for myself. But our time together was fleeting.

His hand cradled my face, his thumb passing over my lower lip. “You’re so beautiful, Harper. These lips, I can’t stop staring at them.”

I pressed those lips as heat crept up my neck. “They’re a little swollen.”

“They’re always swollen. That’s what I love about them.” He sat up, took my face in both his hands. Pushed his forehead to mine, our noses brushing. “Thank you.”

It was an odd thing to say. Especially when I was naked. And he was naked. And our heads were pushed together as if we were performing some ancient form of greeting.

“Thank you?” I repeated. “For what?”

“For giving me what I didn’t deserve.”

We didn’t get far into our kiss when Lawson’s phone began vibrating atop the chest of drawers.

“That’s probably—what time is it?” He darted a gaze around the room, but of course the digital clock was still covered. “Did you check the time?”

“It’s almost 10:30.” I retied my robe, vacated the bed to grab his phone. “Hope you didn’t have any appointments this morning.”

He scrubbed his face with his hands. “Just our flight at noon.”

I handed him his phone, allowing my eyes to roam his bare chest, his hips where the white sheet fell down just far enough to reveal the curve of his ass.

This man had made love to me last night.

*All night.*

I'd never be able to look at him again and not think about it. About his body hovering above mine, inside me. Under me as his hands guided my hips.

"Yep," he said and clicked *accept*. "Mornin', Katie. Yep, yep, we're up." He threw off the sheet and jumped out of bed and my eyes hungrily followed him, half-amazed, half-jealous of his confidence. Especially when I was still clutching my robe like a Bennett girl. "Getting in the shower right now. Yep. I'll meet you down there, no problem."

He hung up and tossed his phone on the bed. His eyes met mine, his lips ticked up to one side. "Shower?"

I swallowed. "Together?"

"Yeah, you know. Wash each other's hard-to-reach places." He grabbed a clean pair of boxer briefs from his suitcase. "Preserve water, save the environment."

"I don't think that's how it works." Plus, it seemed incredibly intimate. Which was funny, I acknowledged, because what was more intimate than sex?

This. This was.

"Come on, Columbus. Grab a pair of your pretty little underwear and come take a shower with me. It'll be fun."

I gave in. Of course, I did. Who wouldn't have? And he was right. It was fun. More than that, we talked and laughed and, yes, he did wash my back, which was definitely hard to reach. I scrubbed his, too, allowed the cascade of the shower to wash away the soap. Then I kissed his shoulder blades. One followed by the other. He was marvelously built, Lawson. Smooth and lean, not overly bulked like a gym-god. No, his muscles came from lifting equipment. I'd seen him carrying speakers,

drum cases, wardrobe boxes. He didn't sit back while his crew did all the work.

I placed a kiss to his spine, in the shallow valley where I'd run my fingers over and over as he moved in me last night. I wanted him then and I wanted him now. Wanted to make love in the shower. To have him push my back to the slick tiles and drive into me again and again.

Yes, that was me. The wanton, virgin-turned-nympho who desperately needed to listen to her body's pleas for rest and repair. She decided to seduce Lawson Hill while he was rinsing shampoo out of his hair.

"Babe, I want to. Man, do I want to," he said, gripping my hips and pulling me to him. We were perfectly aligned, his hardening cock pressed against my center. All I had to do was lift my leg over his hip, guide him inside. "But I'll never hear the end of it if we miss our flight. Katie's a stickler for punctuality."

Usually, I was, too. But responsibility seemed to be slipping through my fingers as of late. Quitting my job, running the roads and skies with a country superstar. Waking up late because I'd opened my thighs for him all night long.

What the heck was wrong with me?

"Right." I backed off him, feeling awkward. And maybe a-little-a-lot embarrassed. "Sorry, I—" *Apparently have no words. Again.*

"Don't you dare apologize." He tipped my chin, ducked his head so our eyes met. His lashes were dark, soaked and clumped together in places. "I'd take you straight back to bed, if I could, and I plan to, once we're back home. Don't think you'll escape me that easily."

I chewed my lip. Imagined us making love in my bed, in the guest room where I'd spent the last several nights since Dad left. Or in his bed. Yes. In his bed, which probably smelled like him. The couch, all the couches, his piano stool, the kitchen, the countertops in the kitchen.

"For now, though, we gotta get out of Vegas. Okay?"

Blinking away the series of lascivious portraits in my head, I agreed, and we finished up, Lawson throwing on a pair of jeans and a fitted tee, grabbing his overnight bag and telling me he'd meet me downstairs in the lobby, while I made sure we didn't leave anything behind. I picked out a pair of skinnies and an off-the-shoulder top, shifting the neckline to fall off the shoulder that *didn't* have a hickey. I strategically moved my still-damp hair to cover the one on my neck.

Alone in the elevator, I blew out a long exhale. A jar of nerves flittered around in my belly, remnants of a long, hot night with Lawson, I guessed, and the anticipation of going back to Nashville. What would it be like, once we were there in his house again? There'd been an ease before, yes. He was so easy to be around. But now we'd slept together, and he'd already alluded to continuing what we'd started once we were —

The back pocket of my jeans buzzed, and I sighed. Retrieved my phone. The Columbus area code again. Peeved, I answered with a curt, "Hello?" and prepared to tell the political canvasser to take me off the damned list.

"Miss Evans?"

"Yes?" The elevator stopped, the doors opened, and an elderly couple stepped inside. I moved closer to the corner. "This is she."

"Are you the daughter of John Edward Evans?"

The jar expanded to the size of a pitcher. I hadn't heard my dad's full name in years. "Yes. This is Harper. I'm John's daughter. Who is this?"

"I'm Lieutenant Carlton Hartline from the Franklin County Corrections Center."

Invisible ropes tightened across my chest. "Like the jail?"

The woman in the elevator glanced at me, eyes curious behind rose-framed glasses.

I looked away, responding when the lieutenant said, "Yes, Miss Evans," with, "I don't understand. Is everything okay?"

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Miss Evans, but your father is currently incarcerated. We thought maybe you might want to speak with him. It would have to be during visiting hours, of course. We have a schedule online, but there’s rules you’ll have to follow. Well, here, let me just give you the rundown.”

He began rattling off the visitation schedule and acceptable forms of ID, but I was only halfway listening. Prison. *Prison*. My strait-laced, quiet, by the book father had gotten arrested, but why? Drums were beating in my ears, ice branching out in my veins. The elevator dinged, indicating I had reached the ground floor of the hotel. The elderly man allowed his wife to exit, then motioned for me to go ahead of him.

My feet had turned into cinder blocks.

“Miss Evans?” Lieutenant Hartline was asking. “Are you still there?”

“Miss?” the man said. “Is this your floor?”

“Um. Yes. Thanks.” I hitched my backpack higher on my shoulder, wheeled my suitcase off the elevator. “Can you tell me what he’s charged with, please?”

“What was that, dear?” The elderly man paused with his wife. “Did you ask something?”

“No, I’m...” I held up my phone. “Thanks.”

“I generally don’t like to discuss charges over the phone, Miss Evans,” said Lieutenant Hartline, “but seeing as your father told us you’re in Nashville...”

“Vegas.”

“Oh. Huh.” Papers rustling. “I’m almost positive he said Nashville.”

“Yes, we moved to Nashville, but...the charges?” Gripping the handle of my suitcase, I searched the bustling lobby for Lawson.

“Unlawful sexual conduct between an educator and a student.”

I found him. Standing at the front desk. With Jenna. She was smiling. He wasn’t. But she was. A flirtatious smile that told the whole room they shared a history. Katie was there, too. Glued to her phone, as

usual. Why was Jenna at our hotel? Why was Lawson talking to her? Holy shit, had the officer just said...?

Every organ in my body stopped functioning. “Wha—” I swallowed against a parched throat. “What did you say?”

“Miss Evans, I would suggest you find a way to get to Columbus. Your father’s arraignment is in two days. He hasn’t hired a lawyer, so you may wanna...well. That’s up to you and depending on your means, of course. He can always ask for a court appointed attorney.”

I was losing lung capacity. Maybe I’d lost my lungs altogether. “Did you just say my father had an affair with one of his...with a *student*?”

“That’s as much as I’m able to divulge, Miss Evans. If you have any further questions, you’ll need to speak with him or his lawyer, when he gets one. Okay? Have a good day.”

He hung up.

Weakness wrapped around my knees. Tears blurred my vision. I searched for a couch, a chair, a space of floor on which to lie down. *Unlawful sexual conduct*. The words bludgeoned my thoughts, lashed at my ankles as I moved for a sitting area in the lobby and sank to the rug between two couches.

My suitcase fell to the floor. My backpack rolled off my shoulder, smacking my hip.

*Unlawful sexual conduct.*

I drew in a watery inhale. Held it. Laid my head to a glass coffee table strewn with tourist brochures and squeezed my eyes shut.

Chatter. Laughter. Doors opening and closing. Elevators dinging. Spindly fingers pulling at my heart seams, tearing off little pieces. Everything occurred in sensory segments. A series of high-lows that had my head spinning.

*Unlawful sexual conduct. Prison. Lawyer. Court.*

My teeth chattered. *How?* How could any of this be possible? Was I dreaming? *Was I?*

More talking. Animated, raised. Feet running. A rush of air that fanned the hair falling across my face. Hands gripping my shoulders.

“Harper?” A voice. His. Hands shaking me. His. “Baby? What’s going on? Harper, baby, look at me.”

I peeled my eyes open. Couldn’t see. Tears. Mine. I blinked and they poured out, rolled down my face, caught in the curve of my nose.

“Shit, baby, what’s wrong? Come here.” He pulled me forward, cradled me on his lap.

I shut my eyes again.

And sobbed, shaking in his arms.

“Katie!” His chest vibrated against my cheek. Warmth. Safety. “Get a car. Right now. Harper? Baby, you’ve got to tell me what’s wrong. I can’t help you, if you don’t—”

“My dad.” Ragged breaths fought the path from lungs to throat. “He’s...he’s...”

“Driver’s pulling up outside.” Katie. “I’ll get the bags.”

“Thanks.” Lawson’s lips pressed the top of my head. His body was gently rocking mine. “Whatever it is, we’ll get through it. Okay? I’ve got you, baby. I’ve got you.”



## chapter nineteen

I WAS TRYING hard not to hate my dad. The news was fresh. An open wound in need of answers and treatment, possibly several stitches, and a big piece of gauze to cover it all up. Only this was the kind of wound that seeped. The sort that couldn't be contained by fabric and adhesive. Eventually, it would surface. Spread. Overtake.

When we reached McCarran International Airport, Lawson sat me down on a marble bench, took my face in his hands and kissed me so deeply I blushed. "Stay here. I'll be right back. Okay? Don't go anywhere." Said as if he really expected me to vanish the instant he turned away.

Emotion lodged in my throat as I watched him jog for the ticket counter.

Katie sat beside me. Glanced at me from the side, her smile a touch impatient. "He shouldn't do this. You know that, don't you?"

Yeah, I knew. Still. I didn't need the third degree. "I didn't ask him to."

"That's the thing, see. With you, he can't help himself." When I didn't respond, she said, "I don't know what it is. Well...I do, but...I didn't expect it to happen so fast."

"What do you mean?"

“Him.” She jutted her chin toward Lawson, who was already garnering stares and pointed fingers from passersby. The woman behind the ticket counter kept tucking strands of hair behind her ear, casting glances at him underneath her lashes. “He falls really quick, that’s true. I know you know, because Darlene told me she told you. God bless that woman, she loves him so much. Can’t blame a mama for instinct, I guess. She looks out for him. We all do.”

I watched her face, searched for an underlying meaning. A crumb of judgment. Anything. “I still don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

Her gaze met my own. “He’s all in, Harper. This? What he’s doing? Cancelling the flight to go back home, booking another for Ohio, so you can deal with...with your dad.” Her eyebrows bent. “I’m really sorry about that, by the way. Are you okay?”

I lifted one shoulder. Let it fall. “I honestly don’t know when everything derailed, only that it did, and here we are.”

“Yeah.” She pushed out a sigh. “I’ll call the local police in Columbus, give them the heads up, just in case. We never know how people are going to react from city to city. Some are cool, giving him his space and all. Others wanna fucking tear him apart.”

I didn’t know why hearing her cuss made me laugh, only that it did. “Hopefully there’s enough people in Columbus still living under a rock, like I was before I met him.”

“He told me you’d never heard of him or his music.”

I looked up and his eyes were on my face, reminding me in flashes of each and every moment we’d had together. He was unfairly gorgeous, this man. And much kinder than I deserved. “Not until the night Savana introduced us, no, I hadn’t.”

“Then you really were living under a rock.”

I indicated a small space with my thumb and forefinger. “Maybe a tiny one.”

Katie sniffed, looked down at her hands. “I guess you saw her, huh? Jenna?”

I had so many questions.

I asked none of them.

“You should know there’s nothing between them anymore. At least, not for him.” Her gaze clung to my face for a full two seconds before she said, “He made it pretty clear he was with someone. In fact, he was about to introduce her to you, when he saw you on the floor in the lobby, crying.”

I said nothing, because my mind was far too jumbled to form a coherent sentence, let alone speak one. Jenna embodied the chick I would never be. Blonde, glamorous, acquainted with the celebrity lifestyle. Though I’d never heard her sing, I imagined she could. Enough to warrant a front row seat with someone like Taylor Swift, anyway.

“I think maybe she saw him last night,” said Katie, “happy, kicking ass on stage and, obviously, with you, and she felt a little stab of jealousy. Maybe a big stab of jealousy.”

“She couldn’t have expected him to be alone forever.”

Katie shrugged. “Who knows? Jenna never worried about Lawson finding anyone else, thought he’d never strive for better. He may be big in the music world, but...right here?” She set a hand to her chest, over her heart. “In here he’s a simple man from a small town. There’s like two streets, a church, a hardware store and a mom ‘n’ pop grocer.”

“I thought Baton Rouge was pretty big.”

She flicked her wrist. “He just tells people he’s from Baton Rouge, because they have no idea what he’s talking about when he says he grew up in Foix.”

That’s right. He’d mentioned that. “Yeah, I’d never heard of it.”

“Most people haven’t. It’s what Louisianans call *off the paved road*. Down where gators cross the streets instead of chickens and people greet each other with ‘how’s ya mama an’ ‘em?’”

I laughed. “Strangely enough, that sounds just like Lawson.”

“Doesn’t it, though? Gosh, Harper. I like you.” Katie threw her arms around my neck, managing to not only startle me but to pull a chuckle

from Lawson, who was making his way back to us. “Please be careful with him,” she whispered over my shoulder, low so only I could hear. “I know you’re going through a lot, and so does he, and he’s going to be there for you, because he’s a sweetheart and he likes you, but you need to be there for him, too, okay? Please?”

Our ears brushed when I nodded. “I will.”

“Good.” She withdrew, stood and hugged Lawson. “Call or text when you get there.”

He patted her back, his gaze locked on me. “You know I will.”

Lawson grabbed my hand and laced our fingers. A zing of comfort raced up my arm. “Let’s go, babe. They’ve already started boarding.”

“Bye, Katie.”

How Lawson landed us two seats together in first class would remain one of those mysteries that goes to the grave with celebrities and bigwig oil tycoons. Security escorted us through the airport, allowed us to skip lines, which earned more dirty looks than I ever cared to see again. It’s not that I didn’t anticipate a few slanted glances in our direction. But alongside the reality of walking through a crowded airport on the arm of Lawson Hill was the shame that my father had been accused of a very bad thing. One no one knew about but me and Lawson and, well, Katie, but she wouldn’t tell anyone. It was too big a risk to Lawson’s image.

His career.

A career he’d worked his ass off for.

“So, are you cool with me followin’ where you’re goin’?”

No. I wasn’t. Scared shitless might’ve been a nice way to describe what I felt. Headed to an uncertain doom, maybe, and with Lawson in-tow. Lawson in all his perfection. Lawson with his sunrise smile and golden heart. Katie was right. He shouldn’t have been with me. Should’ve gone back to Nashville, back to his pristine world, to safety.

Yet I couldn’t imagine sitting on a plane without him.

Couldn't sketch a picture where he didn't occupy the space right next to me.

"Yeah," I whispered, marveled by the glow of his eyes in the sunlight. "Yes."

"Good. 'Cause Mama always told me to follow my dreams."

He grinned a grin that soaked into my skin and I laughed. Because, yes, the rhyme but also because he dripped charm like ice cream off a cone.

I swatted at his thigh and he caught my hand. Kissed my fingertips. "How many of these do you have?"

"I'll be here all week, darlin'. Well, in Columbus. Hey, do they have a mall there?"

"Um...yes?"

He leaned his head against the headrest. "I haven't been to a mall in ages."

"Why do you want to go to a mall?"

He shrugged. "See what's out there, I guess. I do most of my shopping online, if I shop, which I don't. Except with you, of course." His gaze dropped to my lips. "That's pretty fun. Is Victoria's Secret still open?" That blue-eyed gaze roamed up, gauging my reaction.

Photos fanned out in my mind like a deck of cards. Me wearing lingerie for him. Something soft, something lacy, something transparent, something that made it impossible for him to keep his hands off me.

"Yes."

He was still staring into my eyes, when he said, "Hey, Harper?"

"Yeah?"

"You were wonderful last night."

My face warmed. "So were you." But I didn't think *wonderful* was sufficient enough to describe what he'd done to my body. To my mind. To my heart. The word for the way he made me feel did not exist.

"Hey, Harper?"

I tried not to smile. I really did. "Yes?"

“I’m really sorry about your dad.”

My breath hitched.

“But it’s gonna be okay.” His eyes searched mine. “One way or another, we’ll figure this out. One step at a time.”

I believed him. Maybe I was being stupid. A victim of inexperience. Definitely inexperienced with criminal behavior that led to prison. But Lawson’s cool demeanor calmed the storm. Soothed the doubt.

“Hey, Harper?”

I kicked my head back, too, so we were almost nose to nose. “Yees?”

“Regardless of what you found out this morning, you were still wonderful last night. We were wonderful. *Are* wonderful. Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, Harper?” His tone had softened and, God help me, I wanted to kiss him so bad. He was trying to ease my nerves. Loosen me up, when I’d been nothing but a coiled mess of wires since I’d gotten the lieutenant’s phone call. And I was grateful. More than he knew, I was so freaking grateful my heart felt close to bursting.

“Yes, Lawson?”

His lips stretched into another smile. “You’re so beautiful, you made me forget my pickup line.”

KATIE BOOKED a two-story townhome in Upper Arlington. *Only place that was available under such short notice*, she’d texted Lawson after he’d told her we’d arrived. Wouldn’t be the last time I understood why she was Lawson’s manager, why she had been since he’d landed a recording contract, why she probably would be for years to come.

Newly renovated, the place looked like it’d leapt from one of those websites featuring lavish Manhattan apartments. The kind most worked two jobs and gave up food to afford. Hardwood, marble, stainless steel.

Clean, minimalistic. Lawson set his guitar case next to an upright piano perched in front of a bay window.

“Of course.” He took off his jean jacket, tossed it aside and sat down on the piano stool. “Katie found a way for me to work.” He did a fancy run that made the hair rise on my arms. Cocked his head to the side, listening. “In tune, too.”

The fridge and cabinets were fully stocked. There was a Keurig and an assortment of coffees and teas. I uncapped two bottles of water and handed one to Lawson.

He took a long pull. Look around.

“Should we find the bedroom?” I asked and his eyebrows shot up. “Not...because of that.”

I was tired. Emotionally drained. No cure or remedy but to face my dad and (hopefully) get the truth.

But Lawson was here. He owed me nothing. We hadn’t promised each other anything. And he’d chosen to stay. With me. Through a life crisis that took the cake on bad shit happening to good people.

I was a good person.

I tried to be.

“How about we find the bathroom, run you a hot bath, maybe with some music, and I’ll figure out dinner. Sound like a plan?”

Lawson was good, too.

Better than me.

“Okay.”

Letting him take care of me was easy. As if we’d been doing this for years, living together, domesticated, a give and take that usually only came for two people who knew one another inside and out. Habits, quirks, good, bad, endearing and downright annoying.

There was nothing annoying about Lawson.

Except that maybe I couldn’t find anything annoying about him.

I took a bath in a huge garden tub, soaked in lavender bath salts while Bon Iver played from my phone and the aroma of whatever

Lawson was cooking drifted up the stairs.

Two days and I was going to see my dad.

Two days and I didn't have a plan, didn't know how to face him, what to say, what to ask, if I should even ask him anything. I wasn't his lawyer. What if he was wrongly accused? Locked up for an uncommitted crime?

One fact was certain.

He hadn't left Nashville to help out a teacher at the high school.

Deep in my gut I knew that had been a lie. Meant to protect me, sure, but a lie nonetheless, and Dad and I, we had a strict policy to never lie to one another. No matter how much it hurt. No matter how badly we imagined the other person may react. Honesty was vital. Honesty had made it easy to be myself, to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, to go after achievable goals.

But Dad, he'd obviously gotten himself into a situation too deep to share with me. And that might've been fine. Honesty was great, but so was privacy. He didn't have to detail every aspect of his life, just like I didn't tell him every time I got my period or whether I was crushing on a boy at school. But this. This was different. Public humiliation, blacklisted by the very town we'd spent our entire lives, prison—God, *prison*.

I drained the tub. Put on a pair of sleep pants and a tank top. I couldn't let the fiction I'd painted in my head to be the end-all-be-all reality, because it wasn't. I knew that. If I'd gained an ounce of wisdom since being attached at the hip with Lawson Hill, it was that one day at a time was the only policy worth having. Yesterday was gone. Tomorrow didn't exist. We weren't guaranteed breath in our lungs for the next five minutes, let alone the next day.

Here and now. This moment. This was it. This was everything.

In this particular stretch of time, my everything was moving between stove- and countertop like he was filming a piece for Food Network. T-shirt untucked over his jeans. Barefoot. Hair in slight disarray but somehow sexy as all get out.



He glanced at me quickly from over his shoulder, turned back for the stove. Glanced again. Longer this time. Smiled. Tap-tap-tapped the spatula to the edge of the saucepan, set it down. Gave his hands a quick swipe on his hips.

Then he advanced on me and there was nowhere to go but the steel table that served as an island. My butt hit the edge and his hands went to either side of my hips.

“Hi,” he whispered on my lips and kissed them. Because he could. Because this was us, here and now, and we were perfect, despite the circumstances that had brought us to Columbus.

“Hi,” I returned.

“I cooked.”

“I see.”

“Spaghetti and garlic bread. Salad. You like that, right?”

“Yes.” I chewed my lower lip as he pushed my hair off my neck, bent his head. Trilled kisses from the flat of my shoulder to the pulse throbbing beneath my ear.

“You smell delicious.” He breathed me in, and my nipples hardened. “I missed you.”

“While I was upstairs?”

“Uh huh. Can you handle me missing you?”

He palmed my breast, slid his thigh between my legs. I huffed a gasp, the friction terrible and glorious, at once.

“Harper?”

“Yes?”

His hands slid over my hips, lower. “You’re not wearing underwear.”

I secret smile played at the corners of my mouth.

“On purpose?” he murmured into my neck.

“Now, why on earth would I do that? It’s impractical.”

“It’s very practical.” His index finger slid just inside the waistband of my pants. “And sexy.”

“Is it?” I tried to play innocent. Truth was, I felt anything but. For the first time in my life, I felt in control of my own sexuality. Like I didn’t have to be anyone but me and that was good enough for Lawson.

His attraction to me was blatantly clear.

And currently pressed hard against my hip.

“I think you know you’re sexy. I think,” he said, reaching inside my pants and palming an ass cheek, “you’re well aware of what you do to me.”

“What about what you do to me?” I challenged.

“Let’s see.” Deftly, his hand slid around to my front. His fingers traced the seam of my sex. One dipped inside to a knuckle. “Well, what do you know?”

The grin in his tone had me grinning, too. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No?”

I shook my head, loving we could play like this. Loving every moment with him.

His hand retreated and I groaned, empty from the lack of contact. From craving his touch. He held up his fingers, the middle glistening with proof of my own desire.

“Open up, baby girl.” His words set fire to my face, but I couldn’t disobey.

My lips parted and I focused on blue eyes that were completely focused on mine. His finger slipped inside. I closed my mouth, the sweetness of my own juices hitting my tongue. My eyes shut. A moan whirled in my throat. It wasn’t bad. Wasn’t at all—

His mouth seized mine and we were instantly wrapped up in each other. Grabbing, pressing, teeth colliding, breaths coming hard and desperate. It was sinful, erotic. The taste of him, the taste of me on both our tongues. We were electric. Powerful. We were *together*, and that fueled my want for him.

My want for a relationship that would never be.

He would go his way.

I would go mine.

*Here and now, Evans. Here and now.*

The thought didn't center me as much as I would've liked.

"Hey," I whispered, because it was all I could muster. I was too breathless.

He pushed my hair away from face, framed my cheeks in his hands.

"You okay?" Concern flared in his eyes like a storm.

"Yeah." I smiled, squeezed his shoulder. Inside, the anxiety had begun to creep up again. Raw, ugly. Feeding me a reality I didn't want to consume. "Just hungry, I think. Maybe a little tired."

His smile was warm. "Then let's get you fed."

## chapter twenty

WE SPENT THE next couple of days holed up in the rental house. Lost in a blur of food, music and mind-blowing sex. I thought Lawson was the insatiable one. He was a man, after all, and men thought about sex... what? Every two to three minutes?

Turned out my libido was equally salacious.

Lawson wrote. He wrote in the middle of the night. He wrote on napkins at the breakfast table. He wrote on the mirror after we'd showered together. Beautiful prose scripted in his all-lowercase handwriting. He rarely stopped. Small details of ordinary life developed into lyrics easily paired with music that flowed out of him like water. In three days, he'd written no less than twenty songs. Some light and fun. Most had me on the edge of my seat, slack-jawed, dangling on an emotional ledge. He was just that good. That talented.

When he wasn't making music, we were making love. Heedless to the time of day. Waving off whether we'd eaten lunch at ten in the morning or three in the afternoon. Food sustained energy, but sex? Sex sustained life or, in the least, soothed the ache that only seemed to die down for short, short periods before I was needing him again. Wanting him so badly as he strummed the guitar and sang, I had to squeeze my thighs together. Remembering him there. Wishing he could somehow stay, that I could keep him forever.

On visitation day at the penitentiary, Lawson drove me in the luxury SUV he'd rented upon our arrival to Ohio.

"I want to go in with you." He parked in the designated lot. Killed the engine. "I know you don't want me to—"

"Lawson, you can't." Katie had advised against it. She was right. The chances of nobody recognizing him in a jail buzzing with officers, visitors and prisoners were non-existent. "You want your face all over the internet, people gossiping about why you were at a corrections center?"

"Hey, Johnny Cash performed at Folsom. Recorded a live album."

"You're not Johnny Cash."

"I could be Johnny Cash."

I cocked my head. "Lawson, be serious."

"I am serious." He unfastened his seatbelt. "I'm going with you."

"You know what Katie said. Besides..." I lifted my gaze to his effortless-perfect coif. "The hair. It gives you away."

"So." He reached into the backseat, came back with an LSU baseball cap. Put it on and smiled so big I laughed. "See? Done."

"And yet somehow you just made it worse." I unbuckled my own seatbelt, opened the door. "Just so you know, your manager's gonna kill me and, when she does, you'll need to figure out a way to hide the evidence, because there's no way you can make it without her."

He met me around the front of the vehicle. "Can't argue that." He grabbed my hand. "You ready for this?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Fact was, I didn't. But not in the way I had imagined.

Lawson and I went inside, handed over our IDs. Lawson drew a few glances, most of them trained on his hat. Passed through two metal detectors without issue. Gave my father's name to the officer who was allowing visitors into the visitation area.

I was turned away.

Dad didn't want to see me.

I was on the list. I'd filled out the application and been approved by Lieutenant Hartline himself. It didn't matter.

Dad didn't want to see me.

"I'm on the list," I protested as Lawson's hand settled at the small of my back. "Check again."

"Yes, Miss Evans. You are on the list," said the officer. He was young. Maybe only a couple of years older than me. He had to be wrong. Confused about protocol. "But he doesn't want to see anyone today and made the choice to stay in his cell."

In his cell. This was so surreal.

"Maybe you can come back—"

"Look, I don't think you understand. We live in Nashville. I came all this way." Cold, I rubbed my upper arms. "Can you check again, please?"

"Nashville." The officer's head snapped back. Gaze tapered on Lawson. "Hey, I know you. You're that country singer. Layton... Luke..." He snapped his fingers as Lawson shifted from foot to foot and the noose tightened around my patience. "Lawson! Lawson Hill!"

Lawson laughed, but it wasn't the easy, jovial sound I was used to. "Nice to meet you." He and the officer shared a handshake. "Like she said, we've come all this way, so she can see her dad, talk with him. Is there any way you can push this through, see if someone can go get him or, I don't know..." Lawson shoved a hand in the back pocket of his jeans. "Something?"

"Sorry, no can do." To his credit, the officer appeared sincere. "We can't force an inmate to see anyone he doesn't want to. You can come back next week, if you like, or write him a letter. Maybe reach out to his attorney?"

"He doesn't have an attorney yet," I said. "Or, at least, I don't think he does."

"Then I'm afraid you'll just have to keep trying, Miss Evans. I'm sorry."

I was about to ask to speak with Lieutenant Hartline. Maybe he could help. Maybe he could speak with my dad, persuade him somehow. But people were beginning to recognize Lawson. Stares, whispers, gasps, squeals, finger-pointing. One girl was jumping up and down, clapping her hands, and an officer had to *shoosh* her.

This was not going to work.

The ride back to the townhouse was the longest I'd ever taken. Part of me understood why Dad didn't want to see me. Pride, shame, being forced to look me in the eye when we both knew he'd lied about the reason he had to go back to Columbus. I chewed my thumbnail, stared out the window. Tried to organize thoughts that kept getting out of line like children at a theme park.

His job. Our main source of income. We had savings, sure, but eventually that would deplete. We wouldn't be able to make rent. I would be homeless. Yeah, I was leaving in September. I'd have room and board at school. But what about breaks and holidays? Where would I go? Would I even have a home to visit?

Heat crept up my neck. Tears pressed behind my eyes, hot, burning. I wanted to know what happened. Wanted to hear from his mouth, wanted him to look at my face and give me the truth. I deserved the truth. Deserved to know if he'd really done what they'd accused him of.

"I just don't know when he would've had the time."

I didn't realize I'd said the words aloud until Lawson responded with, "You couldn't have been together twenty-four-seven. Right?"

"I don't know." I didn't know anything anymore.

Lawson sighed heavily. "I shouldn't have gone in."

I huffed a laugh. "You think?"

The weight of his stare pressed against my cheek. "Come on, Harper. If I had known—"

"How could you *not* know?" I met his gaze for a second before he was forced to return attention to the road. "You're well aware of the reaction when people see you. They lose their freaking minds, Lawson.

It's like it didn't even matter people were there to visit their loved ones. Once they saw you—"

"I get it, I get it. It was a bad idea, okay? You don't have to explain the situation. I was there." His jaw set and he pulled in a deep breath. Released it slowly through his nose.

It was the second time I'd seen him even remotely angry. We still hadn't talked about the first. When he and the guy who had filled his empty seat in Vegas had exchanged cold stares and forced conversation.

I clenched my hands, inhaled a calming breath. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault."

"No." His lips flattened. "It is."

"Lawson."

"It has its perks, sure, but when I'm attempting to do regular, human things like buy food or put gas in the truck..."

"Or visit some chick's dad in prison."

"You're not just some chick, Harper." He glanced at me, his expression fierce. "Get that out of your head. Please."

A few heavy heartbeats passed, and I blew out a breath. The way he looked at me made me want things that weren't part of the plan. Blurred everything else into a barely discernable mist: college, my dad, the fact I soon might not have a place to live. Lawson looked at me and I saw his soul. I saw depth and beauty and myself reflected in a way I liked.

I liked me when I was with him.

"I'm sorry it didn't go the way you planned," he said. "Sorry if I played a part in that, too. Honestly, the thought that it might go badly, that people might recognize me, didn't even cross my mind. Naïve, maybe, but there it is. Lawson Naïve-as-Hell Hill."

"Ugh." I stared at the truck ceiling. "Why can't I have a normal boyfriend?" I said, quoting Helen Hunt in *As Good As It Gets*. I let my gaze wander to Lawson and was pleased to see a smile ticking the corner of his mouth. "You know it was the hat, right?"



His smile widened so that the corner of his eye crinkled. I loved that. “Did you see the death glares I was getting? Man. Is there really that much LSU hate all the way up here?”

“I mean, we lost a national championship to them in ’08 and they’re still gloating. Kinda burns, you know?”

“Uh huh.” The grip he had on the steering wheel made his muscles flex from forearm to bicep and I found myself loving that about him, too. The little things that made him. The mix of colors in his lashes that weren’t just blond but about twenty different shades of blond and brown. A freckle on the column of his neck that I wanted to kiss. The shadow beneath his jaw.

“You’re not naïve, by the way.”

Side-glance. “No?”

I shook my head. “You just see the best in everybody.”

WE WERE CLOSING in on week three in Ohio.

Almost three weeks and Dad refused to see me. He’d pled not guilty, elected to have the court appoint him an attorney, remained in jail because he couldn’t make the fifty-thousand-dollar bond. Facts anyone could find on the court’s public website. I’d attempted two more visits, both with Lawson waiting outside, both ending in me turned away by an officer with apologies in his eyes. Apologies that gave me nothing but more unanswered questions.

There was no one I could call and talk to. No one I *wanted* to talk to, not about this. The teachers Dad used to work with? The paltry handful of friends I’d left behind when Dad had gotten the job in Nashville? All were either on summer vacation or readying for college and just...no. I couldn’t. How would I even lead into that conversation? *Hey, remember me? So, my dad’s been accused of having sex with a student. Any idea if it’s true? And if it’s true, who it is?*

No, thank you.

After the third and, I'd decided, final trip to the prison, Lawson didn't drive back to the townhouse. At least, not immediately. I wanted to. I needed him. Emotions had wrung me dry, my heart was bleeding, and I wanted to feel him filling me. Replenishing all I'd lost in the span of a few long weeks. He wiped away the pain with his kisses, purged the rejection with his body.

But he detoured that day, because he was Lawson and unpredictable at the oddest moments.

"Think they've got ice cream in here?" He wrapped an arm around me as we walked toward the mall entrance. It was a weekday, the parking lot not as packed as it would be on Saturday or Sunday. Maybe it'd be okay. "Ice cream makes everything better."

"That sounds like a line out of a rom-com." I was trying to be cheerful. I really was. Tough when the only family you had left in the world crapped out on you. "Are you made up of nothing but lines? Movie lines, lyric lines, pickup lines?"

"Have I told you your eyes are bluer than the Adriatic? And I sure don't mind bein' lost at sea."

That yanked a genuine laugh out of me. "Stop it!"

He kissed my cheek. "Am I made up of nothing but lines. You are somethin' else, woman."

"Hey, I just call 'em like I see 'em." I was already feeling better, lighter. Lawson's warm personality wrapped around me, followed by an instant rush of gratitude. For him, for all he'd done. For being with me, when a million other places were probably much more appealing. For being a friend, a shoulder, a sanctuary in a time when every move I made felt like I was hitting a large brick wall.

He opened the door and waved me inside like a coachman bowing to a duchess. "After you, madam."

"Why, thank you!" I attempted a curtsy, which wasn't a curtsy at all, regardless of how many times I'd watched *Pride and Prejudice*. "So very nice of you."

“That’s me. Mr. Nice Guy.”

Sensing the self-deprecation in his tone, I laced my fingers with his, pulled him close. “Hey, I like my Mr. Nice Guy, thank you very much.” I stood tiptoe, kissed his lips, and he inhaled sharply. Pressing my forehead to his, our noses brushing, I whispered, “So, don’t make fun him or you’ll have me to deal with. Got it?”

“Got it,” he whispered back and stole another kiss. “Now, seriously. Ice cream.”

“I think it’s this way.”

Twenty minutes later, we sat at a small round table in the food court, he with his mint chocolate chip and me with my go-to butter pecan.

“I don’t know how you do it,” I said after a moment.

He paused, mid-bite. “What? Mint chocolate chip? It’s the best ice cream in the world.”

“Uh, no it’s not. Besides, I’m surprised you can even eat that, when you tasted, like, six different ones before making a choice.”

“Five.” He pointed his spoon at me. “Don’t judge.”

“But I meant the stage. At the awards show? Singing in front of all those people. Not just fans, but your peers. Like, people who do what you do.”

“Yeah.” He took a bite. “It sucks.”

“Really?”

“No, not really.”

I shoved his arm and he laughed. “Come on, seriously. I can see why you might get a little comparison syndrome, not that anyone could compare.”

“You’ve never had to do anything in front of your peers?”

“Sure, yeah, but not like you.” Not like bearing your soul to thousands.

Lawson set down his bowl. “Okay, shoot. When was the last time?”

I swirled my spoon around a pecan chunk. “Valedictorian speech.”

“Ah, wow.” He sat back in his chair. Rubbed his upper lip. “I’ll bet that was something.”

“Almost unbearable, actually. I’d never felt so nervous. Being judged for something I wrote?” I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“But when you’re an attorney, you’ll write legal briefs. You’ll have to go to court, stand in front of a judge, argue with other attorneys in front of juries. Right? Or is that just on television?”

“No, it’s real and, yeah, I’m aware of all that. It’s just...hard for me. Being in front of people? Everyone staring, waiting for you to screw up.”

“You can’t look at it that way, Harper. If you get too much in your own head, instead of enjoying the moment, well...that’s just a recipe for disaster.”

“Experience?” I licked a glob of caramel off my spoon and felt my thighs tingle when he found sudden fascination with my mouth. “As an artist, I’d think it would be hard *not* to be in your own head all the time.”

“It’s pretty much where I live, that’s true enough.” He folded his hands on the table. “When I go on stage, I tell myself there’s no one out there, nobody cares what I say or do. It’s just me doing my thing, for me and no one else. It’s the only way I get through.”

“Wow, that’s...kind of poetic.”

“I don’t know about poetic. Coping, maybe. Hey, you hear that?” He straightened, gaze scanning the food court. Head canted like a curious bird, listening.

I did hear it. An acoustic guitar, a male’s voice gliding on the air. “Musicians used to set up in the center sometimes and play for the shoppers, accepting tips in open instrument cases. I’m sure you’re familiar with the street players or, in this case, mall players.”

“Yeah.” He got up, tossed his empty bowl in the closest receptacle. “That used to be me. Come on, Columbus. Let’s check it out.”

Hand in hand, we walked-ran toward the heart of the mall. I couldn’t believe how excited he was, how eager. He was a country music superstar, had performed for sold-out stadiums across the world, written

songs that'd spent weeks in the top ten, not just for himself but for other artists. And a hometown musician who probably spent most of his time in malls, bars and street corners was who got his heart racing?

I didn't know whether to be happy or jealous.

A decent crowd had gathered, and Lawson shouldered us past countless bodies until we were face to face with the artist standing alone with his guitar. He looked like a nineties grunge star. A pre-fame Chris Cornell with his worn jeans, Doc Martens and plain white tee. His voice was gruff, raspy, like a male Amy Winehouse. And he was singing one of Lawson's songs, a ballad from *Fever Dreams* that'd never hit the radio.

Warmth rushed through my skin and I squeezed Lawson's arm. "You should go up there," I whispered close to his ear, but he shook his head.

"I'm not taking this moment from him." He was recording the guy with his phone, his expression one of utter enthrallment.

Was I surprised? No. He'd done the exact same for Christina Rose the night her guitar player bailed. Stayed back in the shadows, zero desire for recognition.

But this, to me, was different. This was someone who'd likely never jammed with a signed artist. The song ended, and the musician opened his eyes, stared directly at Lawson. His face split into a huge smile, one I had a feeling would be on album covers someday.

Leaning into the microphone, he said, "Mr. Hill, is that you?"

The crowd's attention turned. Women gasped. Children cheered. Men began murmuring amongst themselves.

Lawson's grip on my hand tightened, then loosened, and he reached his hand out to the artist, who instantly stepped out from behind the mic stand and shook it firmly.

"Great rendition of *Fallin'*," said Lawson as the crowd whispered around us. "Better than my original."

"No way, man, are you serious? That's an awesome song. I dig all your stuff, especially the B-sides. Learned more than a few riffs from

stopping, rewinding and playing your music over and over.”

“Yeah?” Lawson’s smile couldn’t have been any bigger. He was practically glowing. “Well, I see you’ve got an extra guitar there.” He pointed to a mahogany acoustic on a stand next to an amp. “Do you mind if I...?”

“Hell, no, I don’t mind! Please, help yourself.” The artist’s hands were shaking as he raked one through his shoulder-length hair. “It’s not the greatest. I bought it secondhand and—”

“Dude, are you kidding?” Lawson strapped on the guitar, retrieved a pick from his back pocket. I found those things everywhere: the bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom. “This is awesome. You familiar with *Delirium*?” He strummed a chord, adjusted the tuning pegs. Strummed another.

“Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. You take the lead.”

Their blended voices mesmerized the crowd. They were magic together, smooth and confident, as if they’d been performing as a duo for years. Before they agreed upon another song, piles of ones, fives, tens and a few twenties covered the red velvet lined guitar case. Everyone clapped and sang along, and the crowd had begun to thicken. My face was tight from smiling. I couldn’t help myself. The day had turned from bad to worse so fast and now this?

My phone buzzed and I backed away, moved far enough from the crush and the music to answer.

It was Katie.

“Hey.” I plugged my other ear with an index finger. “Sorry, were you trying to call Lawson?”

“Yes, but really, I need to talk to you, too. I’ve got news, Harper, and it’s not good, okay? Listen to me. You and Lawson need to get back to Nashville, ASAP. I’ll book the flight, close out your stay at the townhouse, call an Uber to the airport and secure a couple of security guards—”

“Wait, wait.” She was talking so fast, and my heart strained to keep rhythm. “Slow down, Katie. What’s going on? Why do we—”

“Have you *not* checked the internet lately?” she interrupted—no, *demanding*. “I mean, have both of you been living in a cave for the last couple of days? Or just under the bed sheets?”

Flushed, I said, “I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“Sorry, Harper, that was tacky. But the news about your father? It’s everywhere.”

“Wait. What?” Dad was accused of a terrible crime, sure, but the alleged wrong happened on a pin in a big, big map. Hardly world news. “How?”

“Sister, allow me to tell you a little bit about Lawson Hill stans. They see a mystery chick on his arm in Vegas. Research ensues. Research that’d make an FBI agent wince in envy. Didn’t take long for them to figure out who you were, background, family history, likes, dislikes, favorite color, foods and that you prefer dark roast to breakfast blend.”

I *did* prefer dark roast to breakfast blend. Why drink dirty water when you could have coffee? But then it hit me what she was saying. If Lawson’s fans—or *stans*, as Katie called them, discovered who I was, then it wouldn’t take a genius to trace my name to my dad’s name to an inmate search on Franklin County Sheriff’s website.

My stomach turned inside out. I felt queasy. Pulled as if weights had been attached to my ankles before being thrown into the ocean. Sinking. Helpless.

“I’m so sorry, Katie.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry, Harper. Just get Lawson Hill back to Nashville. Now.”

## chapter twenty-one

KATIE HADN'T OVEREXAGGERATED. The internet was sprawling with news stories about Dad's indiscretion. Alongside them were the headlines declaring Lawson Hill's mystery-date to the Vegas awards ceremony as the daughter of a sexual predator.

Social media lit up in a wildfire rage of people either defending or cancelling Lawson. There were no in-betweens. No one willing to see both sides. Some pleaded that children shouldn't be blamed for the sins of their fathers, while others declared Lawson *just as bad as the criminal dad* for staying with me.

I was mortified.

No, mortified wasn't the word. In fact, I didn't think the right word existed for what I felt. Stupid. Cheap. Responsible, even though I wasn't. Reality—*my* reality had gone from normal to devastating in less time than it took a ref to throw a penalty flag. That's what this felt like. A penalty on every step I'd taken since we'd moved to Nashville. A penalty on happiness, because I had been happy. Maybe *too* happy.

To make it worse, Lawson shrugged off the media's reaction like a piece of lint. Moved forward, carried on as if nothing had happened. As if they were writing great things about him, instead of murdering the good name he'd worked hard for.

His kindness didn't break.



His attentiveness didn't falter.

His smile was still intact.

"You want a sandwich or something?" he asked one afternoon.

I sat curled up to the end of the couch in his music room, listening to the rain hitting the roof and the windows. Savana had just left. Chris, too. They'd offered to check on the house. I couldn't go back, even though I needed to. Dad was still there. Maybe not physically, but he'd walked through every room. His clothes were in the closet, his toiletries in the shower, the mug he liked in the strainer. I'd given Savana the keys, thanked her a dozen times, regardless she'd told me not to.

"Don't sweat it," she'd said, but I could hear it in her voice. Judgment. Disappointment. That she'd introduced me to Lawson. Worse, that we'd hit it off, gotten close, and now he was paying the price for my family drama.

"Harper?" Lawson moved further into the room, rubbed his hands together. Freshly showered and shaven, he looked comfortable in his black cotton v-neck and sweatpants. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really." I tucked my legs closer to my body, wishing I could crawl into a ball, hide my head and fade into a state of hibernation. Anything to avoid dealing with what I knew I'd eventually have to deal with. Only, I didn't know how. There were no answers, only questions.

Lawson slid his hands inside his pockets. His biceps and forearms were tight from an early morning workout session with his personal trainer. "I won't let you starve yourself."

"I'm not doing it on purpose."

"Then what are you doing?" He sat down beside me, so close his thigh pushed up against my shins. His stare was devastating, especially since I wanted him to be angry. Wanted him to yell, throw things, rage for the loss of his reputation.

"Brooding."

This made him smile in amusement. "Do women brood?"

"Sometimes."

“Okay. Can you eat while you’re brooding? A sandwich? A bowl of soup?” He waggled his brows. “Cake?”

Savana had brought over a gorgeous three-layer Italian cream cake as a congratulations to Lawson’s performance on the awards show. *His favorite*, she’d said, placing the box on the kitchen counter, and then made him promise he’d pace himself. Cake wasn’t on a superstar’s diet plan.

“I’m thinking about leaving early for England.”

I released a shaky breath. Better to get it out now, spare both of us, allow his team to repair the damage.

His brows bent. “Harper.”

“I emailed Cambridge’s accommodations department and they said, given the circumstances, they can arrange for an early move-in.” Tears blurred my vision and I sniffed. “I can’t stay and allow this to happen to you, Lawson.”

“Allow what to happen to me?” Anger flared in his eyes. He set a hand to the cushion behind my head, waiting for my reply.

“What they’re saying about you, the gossip, the mean comments on social media. People are saying they’ll never go to another one of your shows, Lawson. Never buy another album. Your Instagram posts are flooded with hatred, your—”

“You think I give a damn what people say?” His eyes homed in on mine and invisible nails pinned me to the half-a-square of couch I’d committed myself to. “I’ve been doing this too long to pay attention to any of that, Harper. They can say whatever they want about me. Doesn’t make it true, doesn’t mean I should allow any of it to sink in.”

“You’re that impenetrable?” I meant it to lighten the mood. We’d created an ease, Lawson and I, and I didn’t want to lose sight of it.

Regardless I’d made my mind up not to stay.

But Lawson was still caught up in my worry for his reputation. “No, I’ve just been burned that many times.” His face was close to mine, less

than a foot. “You think you’re the first girl I’ve dated who’s made headlines?”

I looked away. I didn’t want to hear about his previous relationships. Didn’t want to know what they’d said about her. Or him. Or them together as a couple, good or bad.

Lawson clasped my chin in his fingers, forced my gaze to his. “Do you think this is the first time they’ve latched onto a morsel of gossip with the hopes of bringing me down?”

I licked my lips. Took a breath that was far too wobbly, but I couldn’t help it. Crying came so easily these days. “This is because of me, Lawson. Don’t you get that?”

“No.” He drew out the word, shaking his head. “This is because of me. Of who I am, who I choose to be.”

My brow furrowed. “How can you say or believe that? My dad—”

“I know what your dad did, Harper.” He let go of my chin. Dropped his gaze to his lap. “What I’m about to say is going to sound arrogant, but it doesn’t make it any less true. The press loves and hates me. They have for a while now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I try to keep a level head. Let my heart lead the way, sappy as that sounds. Turns out, the press loves a do-gooder, someone who treats his fans well, commits time and money to charity, keeps his nose clean. But they’re also lying in wait. Holding their breaths for that first slip, the instant I turn away a fan begging for an autograph. Never mind I’m about to miss a flight. Or when I decline to donate to save the dolphins, regardless that I just wrote a million-dollar check to a charity that ships medical supplies to impoverished countries.”

“Or when you date a girl who’s got a criminal for a dad.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “That is a pretty good one.” His eyes found mine, sparkling, full of patience and understanding. “They’ll have fun with it for a while, sure, but...” He shrugged, sighed. “It’ll pass just like everything else, darlin’.”

I wanted to tell him he was wrong. He may have thought he had the gravity of the situation all figured out, but he'd never dealt with this level of crazy before. I opened my mouth for a rebuttal, but he put a hand on my knee and warmth shot up my thigh.

"You're not a lawyer yet, so don't try and dispute the testimony. Besides," he said, leaning closer, "this is one argument you won't win." His mouth was so close to mine I felt every breath. "Counselor."

That he managed to sexually charge the air when I'd fallen into the deepest, dampest, ugliest well was maddening. He threw me off balance. Defied logic. Broke rules. I despised rulebreakers.

"Rockstar," I countered.

His throat bobbed. "Don't leave me, Harper. Not yet." He gripped my leg, gently coaxed me into his lap. I straddled him, looped my arms around his neck.

His fingers traced the arch of my brow, trailed down my temple, my cheek. His eyes followed the movement.

"I would do anything for you, you know that?"

"Lawson..."

"Anything you want, anything your heart desires, I'd exhaust all resources, drain bank accounts, set cities on fire, tell the press to piss off and go to the ends of the earth. On foot, if I had to."

I searched his eyes. "Why?" I breathed.

"Why? You know why."

I answered him with a kiss.

Doubtless we'd lost our minds. Emotions were high. Dad was locked up, wouldn't speak to me. At least five times, Katie had chastised Lawson for his refusal to make a statement to the press, and those were just the conversations I'd overheard. Savana was mad at both of us. I didn't know how the others felt, Lawson's friends, but I imagined they, too, were weirded out. Lawson had extended the invitation for their regular weekly jam session, but each gave the excuse of a *previous engagement*.

As if they'd decided amongst themselves to stay far, far away. At least until the media buzz died down, if it ever did.

Of course that's why he was making chivalrous proclamations. *Of course* it was. Romantic Lawson, high on emotions and earth-shattering sex, declaring he'd burn down cities for me.

"Give into me, Harper," he said, kissing me deeper.

My bones liquefied and my legs trembled as Lawson held my face in one hand, his tongue sliding against mine. I clutched his arm. His whole body contracted against mine, electrical currents hummed between us. He tasted so good and his low groans sent warmth and desire on a spiraling chase that ended at a sharp point between my legs.

I wanted more. Wanted his hands to roam my bare skin. And I wanted to touch him, too.

I sat back on his thighs, tugged off my t-shirt. Dropped it over the back of the couch.

Our gazes tangled, his hazed with need as he followed the line of my neck. My pulse rose at a steep angle as he took over the task of unfastening the front clasp of my bra. His hair brushed my nose. And when he pushed the straps off my shoulders, his lips found mine again.

We kissed wildly, my hands surging up his back and into his hair. He gripped me, held me close, his hands splayed at my waist. His thumb brushed my spine. I pulled back, lifted the hem of his shirt. He raised his arms, his eyes trained on my face as I removed the light material and tossed it to the floor.

I touched him. Smoothed his toned chest, the soft contours of his abs. He pulled in a long inhale, then slowly let it go, as if he'd been holding his breath for minutes.

"One sec," I whispered and kissed the tip of his nose.

Gracefully as I could, I eased off his lap and removed my sleep pants, kicking them to the side.

He murmured something, words I couldn't decipher for the beating of my heart to my eardrums. I straddled him again, my knees hitting the

back of the couch on either side of his hips.

“Harper.” His hands took my face, his head angling as he kissed me hard, harder and harder still. “I’m crazy about you.”

My hips ground against his erection, an instinctive cadence that turned our kiss into a series of gasps, nips, grazing of teeth and mating of tongues.

“Harper,” he whispered again and without having to ask, I knew.

Shifting to the side, we both worked to remove his sweatpants, stealing kisses in between, until there was not a stitch of clothing left between us. Then I was on top of him and we both gasped at the relief of skin against skin, of silky heat against velvet steel.

His arms came around me, his chest brushing the pebbled peaks of breasts. “Are you sure?” His eyes penetrated mine and I understood.

We didn’t have a condom.

I kissed his forehead, breathed onto his skin. “I’m on the pill,” I whispered.

His head jerked up and down. “Okay.” No further questions. No second-guessing.

He gripped my hips, his eyes focused on my own, and urged me up, then down, down.

A pained moan escaped him, and I gasped with equal parts reprieve and ecstasy, as his entire length slid inside me. Filling me to the hilt.

We held still for several breaths, feeling, taking each other in.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “for your father, for the press, for my part in your anxiety—”

“Shh.” I pushed my fingers to his lips. “You don’t ever have to apologize for who you are. Not to me, not to anyone.”

“But this is your life, too, Harper, and I—”

I silenced him with a kiss, and he responded easily, kissing me back with a dire need I felt deep in my core.

Together, we moved, finding a rhythm that ignited our bodies and sealed everything between us over the last weeks. He was careful, tender.

Sinking into tight, wet heat over and over. His mouth opened on my neck. Then the space beneath my chin. I held on to his shoulders. Allowed my thighs to take the effort of keeping our bodies in sync.

The burn inside began to build, and I tilted my head back, eyes shut, savoring the sounds we made, the scent of sweat and the earthy male spice that was all him. His warmth furled around me, awakened nerve endings. My body cinched tight. His blunted fingernails dug into my back.

I cried out. Gaspd his name.

*God, this is everything. He is everything.*

I trembled, the orgasm undulating through me, but I didn't stop. I held him. Loving his breath on my skin, the strength in his touch. I said his name again and his release came—hard. He buried his face in my neck, groaning as his body shook.

We stilled. Our lungs taxed. Bodies humming. A bead of sweat skimmed the length of my neck, traveled between my breasts and pooled in my navel.

“Harper,” he breathed, and gooseflesh rose all over my skin.

“I know.”

## chapter twenty-two

IN THEORY, and in the spirit of bad decisions, the morning I realized I hadn't started my period should've arrived weeks after our grand idea to have sex without a condom. Because we hadn't just stopped there on the couch in the music room. I'd announced I was on the pill, which was true. At fifteen, irregular periods had my female-terrified father pushing me front-and-center with a gynecologist. But since I'd said it aloud to Lawson, we'd quickly, perhaps foolishly taken that as our sign to ditch condoms altogether.

We had sex everywhere that day. On the couch, the kitchen counter, the dining room table, the shower, the floor of the media room. "Give me thirty," Lawson would say in between and we'd spend the next half hour kissing, touching, leading up to another round of unprotected love-making.

Soreness didn't bother me anymore, not like the first time or the second or even the third. Now, I felt only blissful satiation. Followed by a building hunger for more. More kissing, more exploring, more of him inside me, bringing my body to orgasm again and again.

So, yeah. If the pills were destined to fail, by all reliable sources on the internet, I should've known a few days after my first missed period.

Problem was I'd lost track of time. Strike that, I'd lost all concept of time. Wasn't until I opened my laptop, intent on sending an email to



Cambridge's housing administration—Lawson had won that argument—that I saw the notification from the menstrual cycle app I'd installed last year. I pulled up the app, checked the calendar. Felt my brow pull. Flipped back a month. And gaped at what I saw.

Two weeks.

I was two weeks late.

The blood in my face drained south, taking with it my stomach and a few other internal organs.

“Oh my gosh.”

Yesterday morning, I'd felt nauseated, waved off Lawson's offer to join him for sausage with white gravy and biscuits. Couldn't even sit in the same room with him for fear I'd vomit all over the kitchen floor. Stress, I'd chocked it to. Stress over Dad's refusal to speak to me, over the horrible stories in the media.

“No, no, no...*shit*.”

I called Savana.

She answered on the third ring. “Hey, what's up?”

Not her usual greeting, but I pushed past the tension between us and added even more. “Hey, I know it's a lot to ask, but do you think you can come over?” Today was her day off, so unless she had plans with Chris, I knew all she'd be doing is either sleeping or binging *One Tree Hill* on Hulu.

“Uh...sure?”

I shut my eyes, exhaled with relief. “Thank you.”

“Is everything okay?” A note of concern. I took that as progress.

“Honestly? I don't know.” I drew in a shaky breath. “Can you do me a favor on your way over?”

“Shoot.”

“Can you pick up a pregnancy test? I'll pay you back.”

The request had exited so fast, I wasn't surprised when Savana said, “What?”

Bile rose up my throat. “A pregnancy test,” I repeated, my teeth chattering.

“No, no, I heard you. Are you...are you serious, Harper?”

“Afraid so. I mean, I don’t know for sure.” My heart was beating fast, way too fast, and my hands were clammy, and trembling and I wondered if it was possible to turn back time.

“Okay.” She hesitated a tick. “Give me like an hour. Is Lawson there?”

“No, he had to go into the city.” To meet with his agent, he’d said. To go over the new project, flesh out some tour dates, et cetera. But I had a feeling their plan to meet had less to do with music and touring and everything to do with the continual slandering of Lawson’s name by the media.

“Okay.” Another pause. “Okay,” she said again as if she’d resolved to bungee jump off the AT&T building. “Be there shortly. Just...sit tight.”

When Savana arrived, she didn’t text or call, she didn’t knock or ring the doorbell. She barged through the front door, ran up the stairs like she was being chased by a herd of demons and poured into Lawson’s bedroom—yes, I’d moved in—with a CVS bag in each hand and an elephant-sized chip on her shoulder.

“Let’s get one thing straight.” I’d never seen her so mad. In true Savana fashion, she was dressed in jeans and sparkly boots with an off-the-shoulder top and makeup that made her look like she was late for a photoshoot. “I am so fucking pissed at Lawson Hill right now, it’s a good thing, I mean a *really* good thing he’s not here or I just might kill him myself.”

“Thank you for coming,” I said, “but why are you pissed at Lawson?”

She dumped the contents of both bags on the bed. Six pregnancy tests, all different brands, scattered over Lawson’s gray comforter, along with a Snickers bar, two Kit-Kats and a Twix. “Because not only is he

refusing to make a statement to the press, he fucking knocked you up. Wait.” She paused, arched her brows. “It is Lawson’s, right?”

“First of all, I don’t know for sure that I’m pregnant. Second, I haven’t slept with anyone else.” My cheeks flamed and I tugged at the hem of my tatty, over-sized tee. “Ever.”

“*Ever?*” Savana threaded her fingers in her hair and pulled, eyes wide, processing. “You mean to tell me he not only refuses to make a statement to the press, but he knocked you up *and* popped your cherry?”

“Well, not in that order. And I don’t really know if I’m—”

A surge of nausea squelched the remainder of my sentence and I bolted for the bathroom, knees hitting the cold tile, and braced the toilet seat. I vomited. Retched as if my body was trying to rid itself of my stomach altogether. Chills raced up my spine as I heaved, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. When my belly stopped convulsing, I sat back on my heels, rested my forehead on my hand that was still clenching the toilet seat.

A gentle hand, Savana’s, laid between my shoulder blades. “Just breathe, Harper.” Her voice was soft, soothing. She mimicked a slow inhale and exhale. “Breathe. It’s going to be okay. We’ll get through this.”

“I can’t get through anything.” Tears leaked from my eyes onto my hand. “I don’t have time. I don’t have time for any of this.”

“And yet it’s happening.”

I peeked at her through a curtain of hair that had fallen over my face.

She smiled, a warm, beautiful thing that made my heart cinch inside my chest. Her manicured fingers moved the hair back from my face, tucked it behind an ear. “Let’s take the tests, okay?”

“All of them?”

“Hey, you wanna be certain, right? I’d wanna be certain.”

Turns out peeing on a stick wasn't the easiest, but I managed all six, rinsed them off and laid them on the bathroom counter. I set the timer on my phone for ten minutes. Savana dug into the chocolate while we waited on the bed like a couple of tweens at a sleepover.

If only it were that simple.

"Sure you don't want any?" She held up a Kit Kat bar, waved it back and forth. "I thought maybe you could use some chocolate courage."

"No, thanks. The thought of eating anything right now makes me sick to my stomach."

"So, how late?"

I picked at a loose thread on my fuzzy socks. "Two weeks."

"Shit." She swallowed the lump of Snickers she'd been chewing. "Vegas, right?"

I froze. She was right. Almost four weeks ago we'd been in Vegas for the awards ceremony. And that night...

"We used a condom." It sounded stupid, even as the words left my mouth. Regardless, it was true. We had used a condom. Several, actually. Condoms were supposed to prevent pregnancy. My stupid, ineffective pills were supposed to prevent pregnancy.

"Maybe you're not pregnant," Savana offered. "Maybe you're just stressed, you know..." She lifted a shoulder. "With your dad and all? Stress can cause you to miss a period, too. Sometimes several."

"Yeah," I whispered. "Maybe."

But deep in my gut I knew. I'd been stressed before. Keeping a perfect GPA and passing admissions to one of the most prestigious schools in the world caused heaps of anxiety, but I hadn't missed my period then. Why now? Because it wasn't stress related. The nausea wasn't stress related. Neither was the incessant rumbling in my belly, a stir I couldn't explain, other than it was different. Different than getting sick on bad food or nervousness before a test.

The timer went off.

"Together or alone?" asked Savana.

I'd never had a close friend. Not like her. Not someone willing to face one of the scariest moments of my life with me.

"Together," I said, and she nodded.

"Let's do it."

The short trip to the bathroom revealed what I already knew.

Four sets of double lines. Eight total. I counted just to be certain.

One plus sign.

One that simply read *pregnant*.

Six tests. Clear as day. Unmistakable.

I lunged for the toilet again, but nothing came up. Just dry heave after dry heave assaulted my body. My back was sore. Ribs felt as if I'd taken a severe beating.

Savana wet a washcloth, wrung it out, and handed it to me. "When was the last time you ate?"

I sat on the floor, back pressed against the bathtub. Sighing, I pushed the wet, abrasive cloth to my forehead. "I don't know. Yesterday."

"Yesterday...when yesterday?"

My shoulders rose and fell.

"God. Okay." Savana hooked her hands beneath my elbows and pulled me to my feet.

She began undressing me.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, although, really, I was too weak to be demanding.

"I'm not doing anything." She tossed my sleep shorts in the hamper. "*You* are taking a shower. Come on, arms up."

I complied and she removed my shirt with medical-like efficiency. Tossed it in the hamper and didn't pay me a bit of mind when I covered my breasts and blushed like an idiot. She started the shower and snapped her fingers.

"Get in. Shower. I'll go get you some clothes. And then you're gonna eat. Got it?"

Arguing with her was out of the question. "Okay, fine. Savana?"

At the door, she turned around, her hand on the knob. “Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Her lips tipped to one side. “Me, too.”

Savana made eggs and toast, which I was surprisingly able to keep down.

“Want another helping?” she asked after I’d taken the last bite of dry toast.

“No, thanks.” I offered her a weak smile from across the bar, where we’d sat processing the last half hour. “Trying to pace myself.”

She’d made tea, too. Spearmint, my favorite. “Are you okay?” She sipped from her cup, eyeing me over the rim.

I wrapped my hands around my own cup, savoring the warmth. “I’m going to have Lawson’s baby.” I inhaled a long breath through my nostrils. Closed my eyes. Exhaled. “I’m going to have Lawson’s baby, my dad won’t speak to me, and I’m going to college in less than in a month.” Opening my eyes, I said, “Am I okay? I don’t know, Savana. I honestly don’t know.”

Something a girl at school used to say kept rolling through my mind. That God would never give us more than we could bear. Her dad was a preacher, and she was always giving us pamphlets, urging us to come to church on Sunday. It was annoying. Her persistence, her constant kindness. But then she never wavered, never changed, no matter how much flack she got.

Later, I found out the verse didn’t exactly go like she said, but she meant well, and I admired her for that.

“So...” Savana drew out the word, slowly. “You plan to keep it?”

“She or he,” I corrected. “My mother abandoned me when I was a little girl. Giving up a child has never been an option for me.”

“Even if it means your whole college plans are about to be upended?”

“Who says my plans will be upended?” I sounded way too defensive, I knew, but when you’re the kind of chick who plans out every major

detail, the smallest suggestion of something putting a dent in those plans automatically raises your blood pressure.

“Harper.” Savana reached her hand across the bar, placed it over mine. The stacked rings she always wore shimmered in the light. “How do you think Lawson’s gonna react when you tell him?”

Doubt didn’t have a chance to seep in.

“How am I gonna react when you tell me what?”

Lawson was standing in the arched doorway that separated the hall from the kitchen. Looking like a rock god in his black jeans, black leather short boots, distressed gray v-neck and aviators. He took off the sunglasses, tucked the arm in the collar of his shirt. He stepped further into the room.

Fleetingly, I wondered if there would ever come a time when the sight of him didn’t make my heart stutter. Or when the way he looked at me didn’t make me feel like I was the most beautiful woman on earth. Now, I was carrying his child and he’d gotten hotter since this morning, which was crazy and true but still crazy.

I opened my mouth to speak, to utter a sound, anything.

But Savana blurted, “What the hell is that underneath your arm?”

Because, sure enough, tucked beneath Lawson’s bicep was a panting, tail-wagging, wriggling little puppy.

“A present for Harper.” He kissed the pup between its ears. Winked at me.

Savana cleared her throat. “Wow. A baby animal.” She got up, set her cup in the sink. “Just what you two need.” Glancing at me from over her shoulder, she arched a brow, laughter dancing in her eyes.

“I...um...” I ran a hand through my hair, still damp from the shower. “What kind of dog is he? She?” There was a pink satin bow around her neck.

“*She* is a dachshund mixed with I-don’t-know-what and before you ask, Savvy, yes, I adopted her from the local shelter.”

Savana held up her hands. "I didn't say anything, but, on that note, I'm outta here."

"What? You don't wanna stay and spend time with your new niece?" Lawson scratched the puppy beneath her chin, and her tail wagged faster. "Help us come up with a name?"

"So much," said Savana, "but Chris and I are celebrating our anniversary tonight, so I gotta run." She pulled me into a hug, and I thought I might start crying all over again. "Everything's gonna be fine, okay?"

I nodded, my chin bumping against her shoulder.

"Your dad, college." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Everything."

"Thank you for coming."

"Any time."

After Savana kissed Lawson on the cheek and ruffled the puppy's furry head, she left, and Lawson stared at me for a moment, his eyebrows bent.

"I should've asked you first," he said. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to cheer you up."

"You don't have to apologize." I scratched the puppy behind her ears. "She really is adorable. Can I hold her?"

"Sure." He handed her over, and she licked my chin.

"I didn't even ask if you like dogs."

"Yes, of course, I like dogs." I said this to the dog, not Lawson, and in my best baby voice. "That's right. I love puppies. Love, love, love." Her little tail beat against my hip.

"Why did Savana come over?"

My pulse roared in my ears. "Because I asked her to."

"Everything okay?"

Nodding, I asked, "Is everything okay with you? How did it go with your agent?"



I needed to buy more time. Needed to sort out how to tell him what I knew—I *knew* I had to tell him but didn't know how. Not even in the slightest.

“Good.” He hung up his keys on a hook beside the fridge. “He thinks I need to make a statement.”

Ice water trickled down my spine. “Are you?”

“I have some ideas.” He filled a bowl with water, placed it on the floor. “Here, let's see if she'll drink. I bought food, too.”

“Okay, but...” I gently set the puppy to her feet and she whined. “Ideas? This isn't like making an album, Lawson. We're talking about the damage my dad...” *I won't cry. I won't. I won't I won't I won't.* I drew in a quick breath. “What my dad's been accused of, the fact that you're dating me—”

“I understand what I'm up against, Harper.” His eyes met mine. “We've been through this.”

“Okay, fine, what ideas do you have?”

“I wanna do a Q and A.”

I thought of an article I'd read that discouraged frowning and tried to school my features. “Q and A?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He leaned back against a counter. Gripped the edge. “Allow my fans to submit questions via the Gram, then...” He shrugged. “Make a video for YouTube, answering whatever they ask.”

I blinked at him like an owl.

“We'd go through the questions first.”

“We?”

“You and I, of course.”

Fear tap-tap-tapped at the back door of my thoughts.

“You and me? You don't mean...?” Sickness bobbed in my throat like a cotton ball dunked in acid. “You don't mean for me to make a video with you.” My lashes fluttered. “Do you?”

“Sure. Why not?”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“You’re my girlfriend, Harper. I want people to know, and I want people to know the truth.” His head tilted. “From us.”

“But I’ve never...I don’t know how to...” I pressed one palm to the cool marble on the bar, the other to my sweltering forehead. “Did you just call me your girlfriend?”

“Well, aren’t you? Harper, what’s going on? Hey.” He wrapped his long fingers around my wrist, extracted my hand from my head. He pulled me close, his arms encircling my waist.

I inhaled him and was surprised that the scent of his cologne didn’t add to the threatening nausea. On the contrary, he soothed the anxiety. Calmed the storm. I laid my cheek to his shoulder, nudged my nose to his neck.

“I realize it’s a lot for someone who’s not used to social media.” His voice rumbled through my body and I closed my eyes. “Heck, half the time, more than half the time, I don’t even know what I’m doing. Wingin’ it’s been my motto since I was four and performin’ in front of people, but we got this Harper. We got this.” He stroked my head, my back. “Yeah?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Lawson stilled.

For a moment, I thought he’d stopped breathing. His pulse thundered against my face.

“I was trying to figure out how to tell you,” I said. “That’s why Savana was here...sort of...but also because I think I’m losing my mind and everything’s happening so fast...” *Oh, crap, here come the tears.* A massive internal sob made my body jerk against his. “We just met and my dad’s in jail for a fucking awful crime and your reputation’s at stake and I’m leaving, Lawson, I’m leaving, okay? I have to go to college. I *have* to.”

He pulled back, looked down at me. His hands framed my shoulders. “You’re pregnant?”

I nodded jerkily, tears streaming my cheeks. “S-six tests. Four double lines, one plus and one that spells it out in all caps.” My teeth were

chattering. I wished my teeth weren't chattering. I tried to read his face, but his normally open expression wasn't there.

In fact, he didn't seem to have registered what I'd said at all.

Fear leaned against the wall at the back of my mind, took a drag from his cigarette, cocked an eyebrow.

"Pregnant." Lawson blinked. Swallowed.

And then a light switch flicked on and I bore witness to the exact second realization sank in. It was one of the most marvelous sights I'd ever seen: a smile—*his*. His gorgeous, famous smile that had earned him the loyalty of millions of fans, prestigious awards, gold records and the heart of an ordinary girl from Columbus, Ohio.

"I can't believe it. You're...really? We're going to have a..." *Blink. Blink. Blink.* His smile was beaming now, so brilliant his eyes crinkled at the sides and my heart felt close to bursting. "We're having a baby?"

"Yeah," I whispered. "Looks that way."

"Oh my gosh, shit." He kissed my forehead, wiped my tears away with his thumbs. "*Shit*," he breathed again and kissed my cheeks, then my lips.

Fear flicked his cigarette to the floor, ground it out with his foot and walked away. Another day, another time, maybe.

But not this day.

Lawson's strong arms were around me and we were both crying.

And kissing.

And my heart felt fuller than it had in years.

## chapter twenty-three

“YOU KNOW,” said Lawson, “I always laughed at the Friends episode when Rachel tells Ross she’s pregnant and he freaks out and calls the condom company, but really...what’s the point in using them if they only work ninety-something percent of the time? Not that I’m complaining, but, I mean, what are the odds I got you pregnant the same night you lost your virginity?”

We were lying in bed, eating the rest of the chocolate Savana had brought over. Tired off euphoria yet too tired to sleep. The new puppy we had yet to name lay curled up on one of Lawson’s shirts on the floor.

“It sounds really harsh when you say it like that,” I said around a chunk of nougat.

“My bad. The night of your deflowering.”

“Now it sounds like we’re on the set of a bad historical romance.”

“A bad historical romance?” He snatched the remaining half of a Twix bar out my hand, tossed it across the room and dug his fingers into my side.

I squealed and squirmed. One of the many things I wished I could change about myself? That I wasn’t so damned ticklish.

“Is that what this is?” His fingers feathered up and down my rib cage, pressed into my waist. His laughter filled the room as I gasped for air. “A bad romance?”

“You’re the one...” I giggled, twisting, trying to get away from him, but his strong arms kept pulling me back. He knew exactly what he was doing. “You’re...you’re...”

“I’m what?”

“S-saying stupid things.” My back arched off the bed. “Oh my gosh, Lawson, *stop!*”

“Stupid things?” Ceasing his torture, he hovered over me, his chest rising and falling against mine. “What did I say that was stupid?”

“Deflowering? Honestly. Have you been reading Julia Quinn novels without telling anyone?”

His head dipped and he kissed my neck. “Who’s Julia Quinn?”

I reached back, moved my hair, giving him better access, and he dove in, kissing, sucking, pulling moans out of me that might’ve woken the neighbors, if he had neighbors, which he didn’t. Not close ones, anyway.

“She writes about deflowering?” His hand slipped under my shirt to grab a handful of a breast. Thank goodness I’d forgone a bra after showering.

“She writes about a lot of things.” I chewed my lower lip as his kisses became hotter, more desperate, his hand abandoning my breast to roam down my belly. “Sex, love, relationships. Sex. Sometimes someone loses their virginity.”

“Sounds like a brilliant writer.” His fingers snaked beneath the waistband of my sleep shorts. “Although, that was a first for me.”

He must’ve felt my body tense, because he paused. “What is it?”

“You’ve never had sex with anyone who hasn’t had sex before?”

“That is the definition of virginity, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but...” It seemed implausible for some reason. Lawson. Gorgeous, talented, panty-dropping Lawson Hill, who had doubtless been presented with many, many opportunities for sex, meaningless or otherwise, had never slept with a virgin.

I was his first.

I used the tip of my index finger to trace his eyebrow, the chiseled line of his cheekbone and his jaw. "I'm glad it was you," I whispered. "It's not that I haven't had other opportunities."

He sucked in a breath.

"Not many, mind you. Like I said, I didn't date much."

"Much." His mouth quirked. "Am I a jerk for wanting to kick every guy's ass who ever touched you? I am, aren't I?"

I laughed. Our legs were interlocked, my knee tucked between his thighs. "I can't imagine you ever coming close to being a jerk."

"Oh, that's right. I'm too nice."

"I didn't say that, either."

"You mean, I'm not nice?"

"I didn't say *that*, either. Maybe somewhere in between?"

"Ah." He rolled his gaze toward the ceiling. "So, what you're really saying is I'm perfect."

"Definitely didn't say that," I teased, and he kissed my forehead.

His arms tightened around me.

"Yeah, I know I'm not perfect," he said, but he was. In so many ways, he was. "I never stop thinking about you, Harper Evans. Haven't since the night we met." His chest expanded, then relaxed. "It's fast, probably bordering on obsessive, but...I've never felt this way. About anyone." Added as an afterthought or, perhaps, a realization.

"Lawson?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"I'm scared."

He pulled back to look down at me. Moved a lock of hair away from my eyes. "About which part?"

"All of it?" I felt the worry lines etch across my brow. "My dad, college." I swallowed, my nostrils flaring slightly. "Being pregnant."

"Babe." He kissed me softly. Sincerity pooled in his eyes, so blue and calm the breath snagged in my throat. He took my hand in his. "I'm

here, okay? You're not alone, not anymore, not ever again, if you don't wanna be. We're gonna get through every step of this together."

"But how can we, Lawson?"

His gaze narrowed by a minute degree. "What do you mean?"

"Cambridge? My education? I have scholarships, obligations."

"Obligations you'll obviously have to put on hold." There was an edge to his tone. Not meanness, no, not Lawson. But I could tell he was surprised that I was talking about college.

Problem was, I couldn't understand why he was surprised. He'd known this from the beginning. Knew, because I'd told him, that I was leaving at the end of the summer. That our relationship was finite.

Granted, he would be a part of my life in some capacity, at least for the next eighteen years, and then only if he chose to, because I wasn't about to force him to do anything he didn't want to do. He'd fathered our child, yes, but it was my choice to keep the baby, not his. And while I hadn't completely thought out how I was going to juggle classes and an infant, I knew schools offered assistance in such circumstances. I'd be okay. It would be hard, of course it would, but I'd be okay. I would make it. One way or another, just as I always had my entire life, I would make it.

"Lawson," I said, "I know it's been a weird summer. Honestly, I'd hoped for something more uneventful, a few months of boring before I left to start the rest of my life."

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but, to his credit, he remained silent, allowed me to finish.

"I don't regret a single moment. Not one. Except for my dad, of course, but that was out of my control—*is* out of my control." I took a breath. "But what I can control is my future. The foundation's already been laid. I'm going to one of the best schools in the world. I'll study under the best professors, attend classes that'll not only prepare me for law school but give me an advantage I wouldn't have had anyplace else. Don't you see? I can't put an opportunity like that on hold."

“You’re carrying my child.”

Blinking, I started, “Yes, but...”

“No. There are no buts. You’re carrying my child. Jesus, Harper.” He pulled away from me, sat up, rested his forearms on his bent knees.

He was still here. Right there, actually, on the bed, close enough to touch with little effort. And yet he felt miles away. As if we were already separated by an ocean.

I sat up, too. Drew my knees close to my chest. “Lawson?”

He opened his mouth to speak, hesitated. Then, “You think I’m going to just sit back and allow you to take our baby halfway across the world, so you can go to school?” He stared at me for three whole seconds. “Have you completely lost your mind?”

I’d never met this Lawson. Clipped. Business-like. As if we were negotiating a contract, not our relationship.

Had he just said *allow* me to take our baby halfway across the world?

Independent, feminist Harper stood up, cleared her throat, adjusted her glasses. “Actually, I haven’t lost my mind, thank you very much. Just because I’ll be a waddling blob in several months doesn’t mean I’ll be incapable of attending classes and working toward my degree.”

“A degree you can put on hold.”

“You can’t just put scholarships on hold. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Screw your scholarships, Harper. If it means that much to you, I’ll pay for your school, when the right time comes.”

“If it means that much to me?” Shock and anger assaulted my thoughts in rapid succession.

“Look,” he said, softer now, “I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just—”

“In what other way could you have meant it?” My teeth chattered. Tears burned behind my eyes. His had gone comically round. “You are not paying for my education, Lawson. I worked hard for this.”

“Baby, I know, I get it...” He reached for me, but I yanked away from him. Childish, maybe, but I was angry. His words cut deep. “But if you’d



just hear me out.”

“Hear you out? No, thanks.” Wounded, I gracelessly scrambled off the bed, glanced around the room to determine whether I needed anything I couldn’t live without. All my clothes were still in the guest room. I just needed my toothbrush.

I marched for the bathroom.

“Harper, I’m not gonna let you do this,” he called after me.

I didn’t answer. There was nothing to say. At least, not until I could cool my head, process what he’d said—no, what he’d demanded. I pushed aside the shower curtain to grab my face wash, when a pair of strong arms encircled my waist, pulling me close until my back was flush against his front.

“Let. Me. Go.” There. I could be snippy, too. “I mean it.”

“Not until you listen.”

“Well, we’re gonna be standing here for a long time, then, because I’m not listening.”

“Then we’ll stand here, Harper, because I’m not gonna fight with you. Is that what you want? A fight?”

“I want to go home.”

“You’re in it.”

“No,” I drew out as if I was talking to a preschooler. “This is your home, and I shouldn’t stay.”

“Yes, darlin’. You should.” His tone was so calm, so patient, and I hated him for it. In that moment, I did. “You know what your problem is?”

I shoved out a sigh that would’ve made my high school drama teacher proud. “I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“You’re afraid to let someone love you,” he said, undeterred by my pettiness. “You won’t let anyone get too close, because if they get too close, they can hurt you.” His arms tightened around me. “I know, Harper, I’ve been there. Self-preservation and I are old friends.”

I closed my eyes as the warmth of his breath glided across my neck.

And maybe because he was tugging on something I thought I'd kept well-hidden.

"My dad," he said, "he split when I was ten years old, not old enough to fully understand the kind of deep shit adults get themselves into and yet old enough to understand that when I saw him four months later in a grocery store with another woman, he'd chosen someone else over me and my mom."

He'd never told me about his dad. I knew he wasn't in the picture, sure, and that Lawson had taken over the role as man of the house at a very young age, but no details. I hadn't asked and he hadn't offered. Until now.

"They fought a lot, he and my mom. Over money, over bills, over all the time he spent at the office. He was gone so much, and Mom needed a diversion, so she put everything she had into my music. She sold Avon, Pampered Chef. Any extra money she got went into musical instruments."

He turned me in his arms and when I looked up at him, there was pain in his eyes. The recollection of memories he'd either suppressed or tied to the end of a long rope in his mind.

"I didn't do great in school." He held my shoulders, his gaze boring into mine. "But I do understand your goal of an education. I've told you before: goals are something I connect with. Mine may not be the same as yours, but I know what it means to see a future and wanna go after it. When my dad left? I blamed myself. I wasn't good enough. If I'd just done better in school, made something of myself, either a doctor or a teacher..." He paused, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "A lawyer, maybe."

I huffed a laugh.

"Maybe he would've been happier," he said. "Maybe he would've stayed. It took years for me to realize nothing would've changed what was in his heart. Because you can't change people's hearts, Harper. Only they can do that. My dad, your mom. They left because there was

something missing in their hearts, something we couldn't give them, something they may still be searching for, I don't know."

I took an unsteady breath. "What about my dad?"

He shook his head, slowly. "I don't know why he did what he did. Why he chose a path that could only lead to losing the most important thing in his life—you. Because I'm going to tell you something, Harper, and if it scares you, so be it. At this point, I don't care. This heart?" He placed my hand flat to his chest, pressed his hand over mine. "This heart loves you. This heart wants you. My heart? It's yours. It belongs to you."

## chapter twenty-four

I GAPPED AT HIM. Tears shimmered in his eyes and I wondered if there would ever be another moment in my life quite like that one. Of me, standing with my hand over the heart of a man who loved me so deeply. Who said out loud how he felt, offered his heart to me like one offers his coat to someone who needs it more.

I needed Lawson.

Truth: Knowing this scared me. Dad had raised an independent woman. Taught me to never lean on anyone but myself. Maybe he was unconsciously preparing me for a future without him. Only he knew the answer to that. But Lawson had entered my life at a time when I didn't need anyone. I'd laid out my plans. Was working every day toward that glorious vision of a future me. Yet he'd smiled at me, spent time with me, talked with me, revealed himself to me, and shown me I *could* need someone and still keep sight of myself.

The pregnancy, though. Unexpected didn't even begin to describe the shock I still felt. A change in campus housing, a mix-up with classes. A bad haircut, a sudden bout of weight gain. These were all issues I could deal with, get past, secure solutions and soldier through.

But a baby.

I couldn't just work through that.

I couldn't just shrug my shoulders. *Oh, well, guess I'm dealing with this now.*

"I belong to you," Lawson was saying through tears. His, mine. "Have since that first night you sat by my side while I played Elton John. And if you don't feel the same, that's okay. I can't force your heart to feel for me what mine feels for you."

If a heart had the ability to balloon, that's what mine did. Doubled, tripled, quadrupled in size so that my lungs felt suddenly overtaxed. I exhaled a watery breath. Behind Lawson, six pregnancy tests lay around the sink, each with positive results. Positivity was a scarce commodity these days and yet there it was.

Here *he* was.

"I do feel the same." I kissed his chin, my hand still flattened beneath his, absorbing every beat of his heart. "And I'm sorry for getting upset. Clearly, there are things we need to work out. Adult decisions and so forth."

"Haven't you heard? Adulting sucks."

"Oh, I don't know." I smoothed a hand up his chest, around his neck. "Some adulting's kind of fun."

He pressed his forehead to mine. When he was close to me like this, fear slinked into the shadows, replaced by a surplus of intensifying emotions. "Stay open with me, Harper." His hand slipped behind my neck, the other fell to my waist. "Let me take care of you. Let me love you."

"Okay."

I melted into his kiss. Lawson wasn't what I considered an alpha. The dominant, oftentimes overbearing male, *Me Tarzan, You Jane* type. On the contrary, he was patient and refined, kind and supportive. The polar opposite of domineering. Well...save for his reaction to my plans to move forward with college, pregnant or no, that is.

But when he kissed.

Yeah, sometimes he was soft and unhurried. I liked that kind of kissing. The kind you could do for hours without worry of having chapped lips and hickeys the next day.

But most of the time—*most* of the time, he kissed like he was kissing me right now. The perfect combination of hard and sensual with an urgency that this might just be the last time, even though it wasn't. But it *might* be.

His tongue moved with my own in an erotic dance. Our bodies were flush, shuffling, shuffling, until he pressed me hard into the tile wall of the bathroom. I let out a little *oomph*, he murmured a breathless *sorry*, and his mouth was on mine again.

My hands coasted up his arms, my blunt nails bit into his shoulders.

Cupping my bottom, he lifted me, urging my legs around his waist. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You're not feeling sick or anything?"

I shook my head jerkily. "All good."

My ass hit the counter and pregnancy tests went flying. *Clink, clink, clink*. His lips rejoined mine with heightened desperation. I hitched a leg over his hip. He kissed a path down my neck and when he met the collar of my t-shirt, he growled and tugged it off.

His urgency made me giggle.

"What?" He palmed my breasts, squeezed them gently.

"Nothing."

"Do they hurt?" His thumb circled a rosy nipple.

"N-no." He covered it with his mouth, and I sucked in a harsh breath. "*Oh, God.*" When had my nipples gotten so sensitive? My fingers tightened in his hair, my legs tightening around his waist.

I ground against him shamelessly, seeking friction. Seeking relief. He fingered the waistband of my shorts, kept sucking and kissing my breasts, one then the other—neither felt neglected. My head fell back, one hand braced to the sink, the other threaded in his hair. His fingers whispered over my inner thigh and chills raked across my body.

“Babe,” he breathed over my taut nipple, “you’re not wearing underwear.”

“You’re not supposed to wear underwear with these,” I told him.

His thumb grazed my clit, and I bucked a little. “God, that’s sexy. You’re sexy.”

“Not really.”

An airy chuckle and he sank to his knees. I watched as he pushed my shorts further to the side, revealing all of me to the open bathroom. “Learn to take a compliment, Columbus.” He pressed a chaste kiss to the aching nub between my thighs, which sounded absurd, because we were being anything but chaste, but Lawson was tender and sweet.

He eased a finger inside and I moaned. His breath was hot, and I was so wet. Heat rolled over me with every soft stroke of his tongue. I was barely breathing, each release from my lungs a paltry puff of air.

“You taste so good.” He pulled back and I whined a complaint. He laughed softly. “But when you come, I want to see it in your eyes.”

He stood and his eyes were on mine, dark and gorgeous and melting my insides. “I want to feel you coming on my—”

I slammed my mouth to his, swallowing the word *cock*. Man, what a turn on. He might’ve been nice and sensitive ninety percent of the time, but the other ten? He was like a freaking sex god. Whispering words into my ear that rocketed my pulse and soaked my panties.

One minute we were making out in the bathroom, the next were making out and in motion. Lawson urged my legs around his waist and carried me to the bedroom.

“Is this okay?” His breath mingled with mine. “You can tell me to stop.”

“I don’t want you to stop.”

He laid me on the bed, and I removed my shorts. “Come here,” I said, walking on my knees to the edge of the mattress.

He lifted his chin and an eyebrow. Complying, he moved closer, kept his focus on my face as I popped the button on his jeans and pulled

down the zipper. His tongue darted out to moisten his lower lip. I pushed his jeans over his hips, revealing his black boxer briefs.

“I can help, you know.” He reached behind his head, tugged off his shirt.

“How do you do that?” My hands spanned his chest, and I pressed a kiss to the hollow of his throat.

“Do what? Take off my shirt?”

“Undress like you’re on camera. All smooth and effortless like you’ve practiced for photo shoots.” I paused. “Have you practiced for photo shoots?”

He started to laugh, but I skimmed my hand over his erection, and he groaned, instead. “I don’t know how to answer that, baby, I just like taking my clothes off around you.”

“I know, but...” I dipped my hand inside his briefs. “I like undressing you.”

“Yeah?”

“A lot.”

“Hmm.” He toed off his jeans the rest of the way. “Well, I like undressing you, too.” He pushed me back on the bed, but I had other ideas.

Shifting, I ducked beneath his arm and urged him to flip over. “I want you on your back, Lawson. Please.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

I mirrored his smile. Bent and kissed his chest. Smiled again when he sucked in a sharp breath. Emboldened, I allowed my lips to travel down, down. I traced his navel with the tip of my tongue and his chest began to heave. Our eyes met across the plane of his chest. *Shit*, he was gorgeous. He made me feel out of control, an insatiable depth of emotion I couldn’t compare to anything else.

“Is this okay?” I whispered, mimicking his concern a moment ago in the bathroom. My breasts brushed his thighs as I pushed the band of his underwear down.



“Harper.” He was panting, his cheeks flushed. “You know—”  
My tongue brushed the head of his shaft and he stopped breathing.  
“Guess so,” I said.

“I think...” He struggled for air. “I think you know it’s okay. *Oh, God, Harper—*”

I took him into the warmth of my mouth, and Lawson let out a slack-jawed groan. His eyes rolled back inside his head. He fisted the bed linens. I hummed and he bowed a little off the bed. He liked that. *Good.* I had no idea what I was doing, but it felt right, exciting.

I removed his boxers and let instinct take over.

I sucked, slowly, in and out, using my tongue to take him deeper. His body relaxed. I glanced up and his hands were tucked behind his neck, his lungs drawing in air. I went faster, stroking him with my hand, patterning his rhythm when he was inside me. His breathing began to escalate. His lashes fluttered. Eyes opened.

“Harper.” Reaching down, he gently gripped my arms, pulled me to him. My body melded against his and we kissed hard. Insistent. He squeezed my bottom, and I rolled my hips. Not for the first time I felt a rush of gratitude for the way his hard lines formed to my softer ones.

We fit perfectly, he and I.

Our mouths crashed, opening and taking. Passion knifed through me. A desperation heavier than thought, greedier than a thief on a fool’s mission

I bit his lower lip. Licked his upper. Swept my tongue against his.

“I don’t want you to forget me,” I said, and I could feel the rapid beat of his heart against my chest. “I want you to remember what it feels like to be with me. When I go to college—” I shifted up, then slowly joined our bodies by aching degrees.

Lawson’s eyes squeezed shut and he groaned, pushing against tight, wet walls. Filling me to the hilt. He gripped my hips as I bent to kiss the side of his mouth.

“I want you to remember,” I whispered again, my heart constricting within my chest, “what it feels like to be inside me.”

Because there wasn't even the slightest possibility I could forget him. What this meant for us, as two people, a man and a woman who had made a child, I didn't have the answer to just yet. I only knew I couldn't divert from the path. No matter how bad I wanted to, no matter how complete being with him made me feel.

I had to press forward.

I had to let go of what happened to my dad.

I had to get on a plane and go to England.

I had to—

Without breaking contact, Lawson flipped me over and eased his weight onto my body. He took control. Our tongues danced in delicious strokes. Thoughts vanished, swept away by sensation after sensation. My body loosened beneath his. Melted. Yielded as he drove into me. I moved with him, and when he slid his arms beneath me, holding me close, our mouths working with relentless desire, I moaned so loudly it vibrated through to my very core.

I couldn't.

Couldn't let him go.

Because this.

This was everything.

He was all the world to me.

How could one person feel this much indecision?

My arms snaked around his neck, my fingers sliding into his hair, grabbing fistfuls. He brought his hands up my sides, exploring, brushing the curves of my breasts. I let out another moan, rising beneath him. Drawing back, he pressed his forehead to mine.

I breathed his name.

His eyes closed, crinkled at the sides.

He came hard, grunting, shaking, and suddenly, I was shaking, too. Our gasps and cries tore through the darkness of Lawson's bedroom.

My lips parted over his, my body pulsing with the most intense orgasm of my life. He took my breaths. Took my sounds of pleasure as I throbbed around his erection.

Seconds thrummed by in heartbeats. His. Mine. He rubbed my thigh in slow circles with the pad of his thumb, keeping my leg hitched against his waist. I wasn't sure when that had happened, but it felt—*he* felt incredible.

"If I wasn't already pregnant," I said, my lips moving against his neck, "after that, I'm pretty sure all doubt would be removed."

"Hmm." Breaking away, Lawson shifted to his back. He pulled me close, and I tucked my head beneath his chin.

He kissed my brow. "Harper?"

"Yes?"

"You're not getting rid of me that easily."

## chapter twenty-five

IT WAS HARD to pinpoint when everything went wrong. When happiness and the somewhat sure feeling that all would be well and good, that Lawson and I would secure a plan to handle my dad, the baby and college, took a swan dive off Mount Everest.

I'd written my dad. Poured out my heart that I missed him, and I wanted to understand and needed to see him, to tell him everything that had been going on in my life, none of which I wanted to say in a letter.

He hadn't answered.

Or maybe he had, and I was being impatient.

I'd also emailed the university housing director, informed her I wouldn't be arriving early after all. She'd been understanding and pleasant. Assured me she was very much looking forward to meeting in a couple of weeks and would I please bring her a trinket from Nashville. Apparently, she collected knickknacks from all around the world and had yet to add a Tennessee-something to the mix.

No, I supposed it might've made a wrong turn a couple of days after I told Lawson about the pregnancy. When we were reviewing the questions submitted to his Instagram.

"How much do we have to tell them?" I asked. "Some of these are pretty personal."

*How long have you been dating Harper? Have you kissed yet?*

While others were downright ugly.

*How could you date chick whose dad had sex with his student?  
Aren't you worried her dad molested her, too?*

"You don't have to tell them anything." Katie was setting up an iPad for the livestream. "We're doing this as a courtesy. Last thing we need is for Lawson's fans to feel as if they're out of touch with him. He loses a supporter for every second he remains silent."

"A little over the top, Katie, but thanks." Lawson nudged his elbow against mine where we sat next to each other on the couch. The same couch where we met for the first time. The same couch where we'd made love. "You okay?"

"Loaded question."

"Some aren't so bad. We'll answer those." He scrolled through hundreds of messages. "And maybe a few of the hard ones."

My hands shook. I couldn't get a grip on my nerves. Savana had texted earlier that she had *every darn faith in the world* I could sit by Lawson's side for half an hour and do this. But the truth was I didn't know how to be a sidekick to this level of celebrity—or any celebrity, for that matter. Sure, it was fun watching them do interviews. Joke, smile, laugh, turn on the charm. Lawson was good at all those things.

I did well to bite my lip when I knew I'd said too much. And because I understood that about myself, I usually ended up shutting my mouth altogether.

"So, you're doing all the talking, right?"

Lawson glanced at me from the side, beneath the veil of his thick lashes. Handsome as sin, he wore a pair of dark wash jeans and one of his signature-gray Henleys that clung to his shoulders, chest and arms. "They'll probably wanna hear from you, too, darlin'. I want them to know you."

"Why?"

Katie dropped a cable. Cursed.

“Because you’re my girlfriend.” He laced our fingers. Kissed the back of my hand. “Because I’ve never made a habit out of hiding my life from my fans. That’s why I do social media, why I upload random videos to YouTube, why I drop songs that’ll never make it to an album to streaming services, why I allow them to submit questions they know I’ll answer in a livestream. They’re loyal to me, Harper. I’m obligated to return the favor.”

“Five minutes,” Katie said.

“You’re gonna be fine.” Lawson’s eyes were sincere. “Trust me, okay? I know people are saying a lot of things, Harper. Mean things, hateful things. But my fans? They’re not like that. All they want to do is hear from me. And they wanna meet you.”

“The only thing I insist you keep off the table is the pregnancy.” Katie attached a tiny microphone to my shirt collar. “It’s soon. You haven’t even been to the doctor yet.”

Heat tinged my cheeks.

“I’m not saying it’s not important.” She hooked Lawson’s mic. “But until you’ve had a medical professional—”

“I know,” I said, irritated, and her gaze snapped to mine.

Her brows bent. “Well, you’re blushing.” She sounded defensive. *Why?* “I was just making sure...”

“Enough, Katie. Okay?” The rebuke was gentle but firm, and I could tell by Katie’s expression Lawson didn’t speak to her in clipped tones very often, if ever. Her eyes batted several times before he said, “Harper’s going through a lot. This is a lot for her. And that’s okay, because we’re here to help.”

My heart was beating so loudly in my ears I wondered if they could hear it, too.

She stared at him for two seconds. “Of course.” Said through her teeth but with a smile. “I’m sorry for coming across the wrong way. Are we ready, then?”

One small battle won, but in my heart, I knew it wouldn’t be the last.

Answering questions was easy enough. A lot of fans sent in the basics everybody wants to know about their favorite artist. How many instruments do you really play? Where do you get your inspiration for songwriting? What was the name of your first crush? What song do you wish you had written? What tv show is your guilty pleasure? What's the name of your dog?

"Um, we haven't thought of one yet." He looked at me, brows raised. "Have we?"

"Uhh...not yet." Our puppy was curled up in my lap, snoozing. "Maybe you guys can make suggestions?" I tried to sound casual, address the tiny green dot on the iPad where thousands of people watched from their electronic devices. I could do this. I could speak to an audience I couldn't see. No problem whatsoever.

But in addition to the question that were sent in, dozens popped up on the live feed, as well. Rapidly. They started with greetings and well-wishes, praise for Lawson's performance at the awards show, followed by name recommendations for the puppy. Bella, Sophie, Luna, Betty, Boop, Zoe.

"Wow, these are really good! Thank you guys!" Lawson was so genuine, beaming like a pro. "Let's see." He leaned forward, squinted a little. "How did you and Harper meet?" His eyes found mine, held for a couple of seconds. "We met through a mutual friend."

I imitated his smile, remembering that night.

Lawson read the next question. "This one's for Harper. Are you in school?"

"I'm attending school overseas in the fall."

The live feed got faster, more comments and questions poured in.

*That's so cool! Where are you going?*

*Wow, you've got a smart girl, Lawson!*

*What do you plan to study?*

*Does that mean you'll have a long-distance relationship?*

Those were the nice ones. The considerate few. The people who, I decided, adored Lawson, regardless of what he chose to do with his private life. I was careful how I answered. *Britain*, I answered one. *Law*, *eventually*, I said to another.

But then there were these:

*Have you seen your father?*

*Did he really do it?*

*Aren't you worried about your career, Lawson?*

*Why did your dad have sex with a student? That's freaking weird...*

*No, it's disgusting, that's what it is.*

*Makes me sick.*

*I heard he's pleading guilty.*

*LOL...no sense in denying the truth.*

If the floor would've miraculously opened into a wide, gaping hole, I'd've leapt into it. Squeezed my eyes shut, prayed for an absolution, a sign that this was all just a dream or for the earth to swallow me up. I needed a miracle. A magical moment, wave of a wand, snap of a finger that'd make it all disappear. Make *me* disappear.

Suddenly nauseous, I moved to bolt, to deal with my embarrassment the only way I knew how—in bed with the covers thrown over my head—but Lawson took my hand, and his fingers were strong and warm.

He said, “We probably know just about as much as you do about Mr. Evans.” His gaze moved for the iPad and I didn't miss the worry on Katie's face, the uncertainty. My stomach twisted. “But it would mean a lot to me, and to Harper, if all of you would please remember that none of this was expected. And that's what life does sometimes, right? Life throws us curveballs and we can't run. We have to deal with whatever it is that's in front of us. So, that's what we're doing, Harper and me. We're taking this one day at a time. And it would mean a lot to me if you were kind, as I know all of you are or you wouldn't be joining us for this livestream.”



I wondered for a moment if he believed his own words. If he felt confident the people watching, the fans who loved him, loved him enough to stand down and give us the privacy and support we deserved. But then he clasped my hand a little tighter and I realized even he knew there were those who had joined just for the gossip. For the drama of one of the world's top celebrities being caught up in a horrific scandal. He knew this and yet he also knew the effectiveness of his own charm.

No one could resist him.

No one could listen to his sincerity, his humbleness and continue to be an ass. Right? Had he been anyone else, he would've been weighed, measured and torched.

Lawson Hill was an enigma.

"Because we're gonna need your understanding and your support," he said.

Live chat spammed almost faster than I could read.

*Stay with her, may as well retire now.*

*Right??*

*Can we say CANCELLED??!1*

*Can't believe his label hasn't dropped him...*

*Oh, it's coming. Just wait.*

*Save yourself, Lawson!!!!*

"C'mon, y'all, play nice," said Lawson.

*Hahahah #savelawson*

*Not funny, you guys... 🙄*

*ikr? rly feel sry 4 him*

*Celebs have been destroyed over less*

*Is the runner-up worth your career?*

"Harper is important to me."

Wait, I thought. *What?* What did they mean—

*Ha—uh, no...*

*omg runner-up hahaha*

*Not even #jenson4eva*

*Yaaasss...JENSON NATION!*

Tension radiated from his body to mine. “No.” His voice was firm, but it didn’t seem to matter. They kept going.

*#jenson4eva*

*#savelawson*

Then it hit me. Jenson was a ship. Jenna. Lawson. Jenna *and* Lawson. *Jenson*. Not only a couple, but a couple the public had gotten used to. A couple the public clearly wasn’t ready to let go of.

The screen blurred. My face was on fire. I was a stranger here. An imposter. Alone, just the two of us, I could hold my own. I could believe we’d find a way, keep the faith. But against thousands, possibly tens-of-thousands of people who felt they knew him better than anyone else?

I didn’t stand a chance.

Katie sprang into action, waving her hand at Lawson to get his attention. Mimicking a slicing action across her neck.

*Cut it off, she mouthed. Cut it off now.*

“So, big announcement,” he said, defiant in his intent to instead redirect the conversation, “in two weeks, we’ll be performing in the heart of Nashville at the summer music festival. Super excited and honored to be invited to take the stage alongside so many talented artists.”

The chat kept going as if he hadn’t even spoken.

*Jenson shippers deserve better! #savelawson*

*Srsly u guys this aint gonna last...stop worrying*

Lawson’s fingers tightened around mine. *Does he think I’ll run?* If only I had the courage to tell him he didn’t have to worry. I might’ve wanted to, but my efforts would’ve been fruitless. Jell-O had replaced my bones a hundred comments ago.

*Don’t make choices you can’t take back. 🙄*

*Someone needs to check on him*

*For realz...*

“Say goodbye, Lawson!” Katie whisper-shouted between her teeth. Her face was red, eyes armed with an arsenal of warning.

Embarrassment. Fear. “*Now.*”

Her tone hit its mark.

Lawson cleared his throat, smiled for the camera. “Hope to see you all there. Bye, everyone. Thanks for joining us.”

Katie stopped the video, and I jerked my hand free from Lawson’s. Stood on shaky legs.

“Harper.” He rose to his feet. Lost his smile.

“I need a minute, okay?” My heart was beating too fast. The room had begun to spin. “I’m just...I’ll take the puppy out.”

“Harper, wait.” Lawson started after me, but Katie murmured something I couldn’t make out for the length of my strides eating up the floor, and his footsteps halted.

I had to get out. To think, to process, to calm myself before I threw up again. Chaos didn’t suit me well, and I knew I had to come up with a plan, even if just for the next few hours.

I needed my head under control.

Categories.

I needed categories.

Categories were good.

Categories meant organization and order, and chaos didn’t fit into either of those things.

On the back lawn I sat down, stretched my legs out on the grass. The puppy hopped off to do her business, yipping at a butterfly, then bolting when it flew a little too close.

I breathed in the air, closed my eyes and told myself to let go of disorder and doubt. The scent of Lawson’s freshly mown grass drifted through my nostrils. Birdsong curled around my ears, followed by a breeze rustling through the leaves in the oaks. The sun warmed my face.

*One thing at a time. Start small.*

1. Name the puppy.

“Bella,” I said to the ball of bouncing fur who had found a stick and was currently challenging it to a duel. “We’ll call you Bella. There. That

was easy.”

Next.

2. Dad.

I'd call again. Write another letter. I couldn't give up on him, no matter how hard he tried to shut me out. Criminal or no, he was still my father, and I was still his daughter. He owed me an explanation, even if there wasn't one. He owed me the truth.

3. Pregnancy.

An appointment with an obstetrician. Easy enough. Still, the tug in my heart was new. The idea that a tiny human was growing inside me; that if all went well, I'd give birth sometime in the spring next year. It was strangely exciting. Scarier than anything I'd ever faced in my life. Would the doctor be able to help with my colossal pile of self-doubt?

4. College.

I blinked owlshly up at the sky. Observed the movement of clouds and birds. College was the one part that didn't frighten me. College, I understood. The education I'd worked for, the education that would fortify the path to not only success but independence.

But then.

5. Lawson.

If Lawson was in the equation, which I hadn't expected him to be, well...see #2.

*And that's what life does sometimes, right? Life throws us curveballs, for lack of a better term, and we can't run. We have to deal with whatever it is that's in front of us.*

My vision distorted and I shut my eyes. Warm tears rolled off my temples, into my ears and hair. Crying wouldn't help, but, damn, if I couldn't stop feeling sorry for myself.

Like the gonging of a bell that rose above a large square, the most basic truths rang through my mind.

*My name is Harper Elaine Evans. I am eighteen years old. My mom abandoned me when I was little. I don't remember her. I wish I could remember her.*

A sob wrenched itself from my chest.

*Five months into my senior year, I was accepted into Trinity College at Cambridge. I graduated with honors, as valedictorian of my class. I gave a speech in front of hundreds of people. They played Story of My Life by One Direction as we threw our caps in the air.*

The tears continued. I couldn't stop them. Couldn't suppress the torment in my chest, the grinding of my stomach as if I was made up of a bunch of useless, rusty gears. The reality of a pain that ran deeper than any wound.

*I grew up in a small suburb of a big city. Sometimes we had it hard. Sometimes Dad worried about bills. We knew how to make meals that would stretch for a full week. But I never felt short-changed. Never felt as if I was missing out. I was loved. Cared for. Afforded great opportunities. He taught me what I needed to know to leave the nest, even if it's happening sooner than expected.*

I blew out a shaky breath. Laid a palm to my belly.

*My name is Harper Elaine Evans. I am eighteen years old. My lips moved silently, reciting what I knew to be true. I moved to Nashville with my dad. And I met a boy. I met a boy with a big heart.*

*I fell in love with the boy with the big heart.*

I opened my eyes, gazed up at the pale blue sky. "My name is Harper Elaine Evans." My teeth chattered as I spoke in a whisper. "I'm eighteen years old, and I'm pregnant. I don't know how to be a mom." I paused to take a breath. "I also don't know how to be a daughter to a criminal father."

Then I shut my eyes again, because it was all suddenly too much. The life I had, the mother who didn't want me, a father I no longer fully knew. College, Lawson, the baby...

*Stop.*

“Head. Under. Control.” I ground my back teeth together. I couldn’t give in. Couldn’t give fear, or chaos for that matter, the satisfaction of besting me.

*Get up.* I wasn’t certain whose voice it was. For certain it wasn’t mine. But it was there, clearer than anything. Urging my body to move. Urging me to keep going.

*Get. Up.*

Forcing myself up off the ground, I took a breath. Another and another until I found a modicum of calm. Clucked and patted my leg for Bella to follow. She did, tongue lolling, ears flying behind her head like a little girl’s bob hairstyle. She was so cute. Right on my heels as I stepped inside, her toes pitter-pattered across the tile floor to where Lawson had placed a water bowl. We had several all over the house. Apparently, he was concerned about hydration.

“Worked up a thirst, did ya?” I wiped my face, tight with dried tears. “Come on.”

Lawson wasn’t around, but I could hear him speaking to someone. Maybe Katie, maybe Darlene. I’d heard a car pull up in the drive while I’d been outside. Doubtless his mother had thoughts about all that had happened. Lawson had spoken to her briefly while we were in Ohio. Though I could tell by the tone of his voice that she wasn’t happy on the other end of the phone, it was clear Darlene trusted her son. But we hadn’t told her about the baby yet. Lawson wanted to do it together, maybe over dinner.

The thought made me nervous as hell.

Darlene and I had had a decent first meeting. But a lot had happened since then, and while it shouldn’t’ve mattered what Lawson’s mother thought of me, somehow it did.

It mattered a great deal.

The conversation continued as I attempted to follow the voices. Low, constant. A clear of a throat, Lawson’s.

When I got to the kitchen, I stopped at the door.

Katie was there, yes. But so was Jenna. And Lawson. And Lawson was close to Jenna or she was close to him or maybe they were just standing near one another, but why would they be? It was a big kitchen. Whatever the scene, their arms were almost touching. And that, too—that, too, was way too much.

We'd just done the livestream. People wanted them back together. They didn't like me. They didn't want me with him. They wanted their star-crossed couple. The couple that looked good in photos and videos and whatever other fictions fans had created in their own minds.

"Harper," Katie said on an exhale. "Are you okay?"

I looked to Lawson, who was hanging his head, staring at the clean tile floor. "I think the question is are *you* okay? What's going on?" I took a single step forward. "Lawson?"

He didn't answer.

Jenna's lips pinched, and she breathed a sigh out of her nose. Her attention turned to Lawson. She set a hand to his back. A gesture of comfort. Of familiarity.

Tendrils of dejection crawled up my throat, same way they did when the lieutenant called me with the news about Dad.

"We just got a phone call from the label," said Katie. "Lawson had three interviews scheduled over the next two days. To talk about new material, the possibility of another tour."

"Had," I repeated.

Lawson jammed his fingers in the front pockets of his jeans. Sniffed. Jenna's hand was still on his back. Why was she touching him? Why was he letting her?

"He also had a show this weekend at a café on the strip," Katie continued. "Small, invitation-only. A chance for people to hear what he's been writing."

Again. *Had*. "I don't understand," I said quietly.

"They all cancelled." Jenna. Her tone snipped, accusing. Her eyes glared at me, as if it was all my fault. As if I was the root of every

problem in the room.

And maybe I was. If I hadn't come along, if Savana hadn't introduced me and Lawson that night, none of this would've happened. Lawson's reputation would've still been intact. Flawless. Sparkling. Unbreakable.

"They can't take the risk on their own reputations," Katie explained. To her credit, she was trying to be gentle. However, I knew the truth.

Katie was teeming with anger. I saw it in the slight tremor in her eyes, the rise of color in her cheeks. As a divorced woman in her thirties on a sole income, she was undoubtedly prepared to show her claws and defend her job—and Lawson's—at any cost.

I couldn't blame her for that.

Jenna's voice rose from the cacophony in my head. "So, congratulations," she said. "You've successfully ruined his career."

I fell silent. Mouth agape.

"Jenna," Katie chastised, but there was an edge to her voice. As if she'd been thinking the same thing but didn't have the courage to say it out loud.

"I need some air." Lawson took off walking.

None of us tried to stop him.



## chapter twenty-six

### *Lawson*

FAME WAS NEVER what I really wanted. As a kid from Foix, Louisiana, dreaming big equated to working your way up to the manager of a chain store or landing a job with benefits and a 401K. We knew college existed and, yeah, some kids went, but few survived. College wasn't pushed, because no one could afford it. And there was no such thing as a *full ride*, unless a kid got a sports scholarship, which was impossible, as our high school hadn't had a sports team for well-over a century.

Which meant if you wanted to get out, you needed nothing short of a hail-Mary miracle.

Mine came not when Mama had sent off the second or third or twentieth demo, or after I'd won first place at a youth talent show in Baton Rouge.

It was at a bluegrass festival in Houma.

Admission was free. I'd gone to observe, to listen, maybe get in on a few jam sessions. It was more incredible than I'd imagined. One of the pivotal moments of my life. Meeting fellow musicians, learning new runs, adding harmony vocals here and there. Never had I felt more in my element. Hours passed and I'd played at two, maybe three camper-trailers when the bassist of one of the headliners approached me. He explained their lead guitarist had gotten sick and asked if I could fill in.

Elated, I'd said yes, of course. *Thank you for the opportunity*. An hour's worth of practice later, we took the stage.

Put plainly, that was the end of life as I knew it.

The guys in the band were cool, appreciative. When they urged me to perform one of my own songs, I thought for sure I'd collapse from nervousness.

I started singing, strumming, and the band came in as if we'd been practicing together for months. Heads began to turn. Conversations ceased mid-sentence. The small crowd responded like nothing I'd seen up until that point. Teenagers who'd obviously been dragged there by either their parents or grandparents were suddenly flocking to the front of the stage, staring up at me, cheering and swaying to the music.

When the song ended and I looked over my shoulder to offer the mic to another member of the band, they shook their heads, waved me off, encouraged me to keep going.

So, I did.

In the blazing mid-July heat, sweat pouring down our faces, making our clothes stick to our skin, we held the stage for two and a half hours. I played until I couldn't feel my fingertips. Until I'd begun to go hoarse. With no real vocal lessons, I didn't know the first thing about taking care of my voice. Didn't matter. I'd never had so much fun. Never felt so high, feeding off the crowd's energy.

The co-chairman of my record label saw me that day. Gave me his card, spoke to Mama about moving to Nashville. I could record in a real studio, he said. Possibly write for other artists. He'd seen a lot of talent in his time, discovered some of the most famous faces, given them their big breaks. But none had impressed him as I had that afternoon on a rickety old stage in Podunk, Louisiana.

I was fourteen years old.

I hadn't thought of being famous. Didn't really understand it. The way people acted over celebrities? While I had heroes of my own—Garth Brooks, Tim McGraw, George Strait—I couldn't fathom that ever being

me. Even three years after mom and I moved to Nashville, after I'd recorded and released my first album and watched in awe as it bulletted up the charts, I didn't feel any different inside.

I was still the fourteen-year-old from Foix. The one who'd been raised by a single parent who worked two jobs and watched old romantic films in her spare time, when she *had* spare time. Sure, we'd come up in the world. We lived in the city, learned how to navigate horrendous traffic, and I'd made enough money to support both of us comfortably.

At heart, however.

My heart remained in that small town. That's why Jenna and I couldn't work. I didn't realize it during our relationship. From the arguments that didn't make a lick of sense to the silent treatments that followed. We were too different. She was a city girl, born with a crown on her head, stars in her eyes and more ambition than a French general.

I was a country boy raised on turnip greens and jambalaya. I thought Starbucks charged too much for coffee and that people who sent their laundry out were just plum lazy. Of course, money and notoriety changed a lot of my feelings towards certain things. But down deep, well...I couldn't seem to stop hearing Mama when she'd quote Dolly Parton: *I would never stoop so low to be fashionable*. Forgetting who I was or where I came from, just to fit in? To me, that was a low stoop.

So, yeah, with the help of a small number of people who'd earned my trust, I remained centered. Kind, even when others were unkind. Focused on my career, on keeping a clean image, and never forgetting who put me in the position to do what I loved: God and the fans. All while hopelessly, pathetically, hanging on to the belief that somewhere out there was the woman I was fated to be with for the rest of my life.

Some pointed the finger, preached that I was too young to think about marriage and forever. I still had growing up to do, mistakes to

make and lessons to learn. I agreed. But those truths didn't change the fact I believed in soulmates and destiny.

I just didn't expect destiny to arrive in the form of a pre-college Yankee girl from Ohio.

No. That wasn't good enough. Didn't do her the justice she deserved.

I didn't expect destiny to arrive in the form of a beautiful, intelligent young woman with eyes of aquamarine glass, the body of a goddess and a wit that forever had me guessing what she was thinking.

"You're in love with her." I hadn't expected Jenna. It'd been months since she'd crossed my threshold, and while she and Katie still talked on occasion, the morning after the Vegas awards show marked the first time we'd spoken since I-couldn't-remember.

She was once everything to me.

Until she wasn't.

Now, when I looked at her, I felt nothing but a sense of acquaintanceship. She was still beautiful. Put together as if she had a show in five and a plane to catch in ten. But the observation ended there. Far as my brain knew, I could've been assessing a fern or an eggplant.

Nonetheless, I attempted to avoid the statement. "It was nice of you to stop by." Sitting on the tailgate of my truck, I leaned forward, rested my forearms on my knees. Clapsed my hands together. "But there's nothing to be worried about. I have everything handled."

"So, this is you refusing to admit it to yourself." She rubbed her palms together, a tick of hers with which I was all too familiar. She was nervous. Why, I did not know. When I answered the door, questioned what she was doing here, she said she wanted to make sure I was okay, what with the media attempting to spit-roast my reputation.

I'd told her I was fine, no worries, but she was already walking inside, and those annoying southern gentleman instincts Mama carved into my backbone wouldn't permit me to insist she leave.

Now, she'd followed me outside. I hadn't wanted company. Didn't expect anyone to go after me, not even Harper, though I knew she had to be hurting as much as I was.

"Look, Jenna, I appreciate your concern. I do. But..." I rubbed the back of my neck, grappled for the right words. "My relationship is not up for discussion."

In those seconds, all I could think about was that Harper was pregnant with my child.

We were going to have a baby.

While that should've scared the shit out of me—at twenty-two, almost twenty-three, I hadn't expected to be a father this early in life—I was reeling with happiness.

From the moment I'd laid eyes on her, I'd known.

Harper was it for me.

The feeling had been overwhelming, incomparable to any other experience. A marrow-deep knowing of space and time. A conviction that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. Regardless Savana and Chris had made a project out of my romantic life, scanning bars, grocery stores and dating apps for not only the perfect girl, but the muse I needed to write again, it wasn't coincidence. *She* wasn't.

"It's serious, then." Jenna's throat worked. Her eyes searched mine like they used to when she expected me to fight back. "Just like that. Practically overnight."

My entire body exhaled, not with relief but with weariness over this conversation. There was a time I would've given anything for just a few minutes with this woman. To be able to turn back time, be different, say different things. Foolish, sure, of course it was. I knew that now.

Now, the craving did not exist. At least not for her.

Yes. Jenna was right in her assumptions.

I was head over heels in love with Harper Evans.

"Look, Jenna, I've got things to do."

“Damage control?” She laughed humorlessly. Funny. The sound didn’t have the same effect on me as it had before. “You’ve got a lot on your plate. I just wanted to stop by and let you know I’m here for you if you, I don’t know, ever wanna talk or whatever.”

“I appreciate the offer.” I meant the statement as a dismissal. I needed to think. Needed to figure out my next move. Between Katie, my agent and the label execs, we’d get this sorted out. I trusted my team.

True to form, however, Jenna wasn’t ready to relinquish the grip she believed she still had on me. She said, “Can I just tell you one thing? Okay? And I don’t want you to get mad or embarrassed. I just...”

“What?” Didn’t mean to sound so demanding, but there it was. Out in the open.

“I miss you. Okay? There, I said it.”

Sighing, I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “No, you don’t, Jenna. You don’t miss me.”

“Yes, I do!”

“You miss having a man who buckles under pressure at every turn, because he’s afraid of losing you.” I glared at her, unable to hide my frustration. “You wanted me to be someone I wasn’t.”

“That’s not true!” If she were a toddler, she might’ve stomped her foot.

“It is—you know what?” I huffed out a laugh, shook my head. “I won’t argue with you. Not now, not ever again. We’re done here.” I gestured to her convertible BMW. “Careful going out the gate.”

I jumped down off the tailgate. Harper. I needed to see her, speak with her, hold her in my arms. Did I have it all figured out yet? No. But she was blameless in all this. We both were.

“Lawson, wait.” Jenna moved for me, set a hand to my chest, and I couldn’t help it, I sucked in a sharp breath. Not because I wanted her to touch me. But because it felt wrong for her to touch me. A betrayal to Harper.

I had no intention of ever betraying the woman I loved. Harper was mine. Mine to adore, to love and to cherish. She belonged to me, and I belonged to her. Wherever our roads were leading us before, they were merged now, and I'd be damned if I'd allow anyone to tear us apart.

I put another two feet between us, my back hitting my truck.

The hand Jenna had used to touch me curled into a fist, suspended in the air for a moment, and dropped at her side. A smirk curved her lips. "You were gorgeous up there, you know. In Vegas?" She took a step toward me, her hips swaying. "I didn't tell you when we saw each other at the hotel the next morning, but I wanted to. Wanted you to know how much I enjoyed watching you, how very different you seemed. Older." Another step. "Sexier."

*I was thinking about Harper the entire time I was on stage.* That's what I wanted to tell her. That's what I wanted to say, the truth. No one's opinion of that performance mattered to me more than Harper's. I wanted to impress her, God, how bad, because she wasn't like everyone else. Before taking a YouTube crash course, she'd never heard of me or my music. I wasn't multi-Grammy winning country artist Lawson Hill, not to her. I was just Lawson: small town country boy, who happened to play the guitar and sing.

And that meant more to me than Harper would ever realize.

Truth was I had no desire to hurt Jenna. Oh, she'd hurt me. There was no doubt about that. But to reciprocate seemed pointless, a complete waste of time and energy.

So, I said, "I appreciate the vote of confidence, but you should really go."

She arched a stenciled brow. "You don't like being told you're sexy? Because you are, you know." She moved closer, closer still, and there was nowhere for me to go without bolting sideways and running like a punk in my own house. "Don't you remember what it was like between us?" Her fingers alighted on my chest, trailed down my right pectoral muscle.

“How good we were—” she stood tiptoe, aligned her face close to mine “—in bed?”

My throat bobbed. Hands fisted at my sides. “I remember you telling me I lacked spontaneity.”

“Did I?” Her lips formed into a pout. “I couldn’t have meant that. Not with all this—” her gaze swept down then up my body “—moving over me, under me, behind me. Inside me.” She palmed my chest as if to emphasize her point.

Problem was there was no point to be made.

“You should go.” I removed her hand from my chest, tucked it behind her back, but she leaned in again, eyes lit with determination. “No, Jenna, I’m serious. You should—”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her. Standing on the bottom step of the front porch. A look of blood curdling shock on her face. Her eyes, her beautiful, expressive eyes, darted from me to Jenna and back again. Our puppy hopped past her, tongue lolling, and started gnawing on the hem of my jeans.

Harper might as well have been a statue in a museum. No movement. No rush to say something, cry, scream, anything. Heck, I wasn’t even sure if she was breathing.

“Harper?” I dared and her eyes formed into slits.

Suddenly, I realized I was still holding Jenna. Or, more accurately, holding her hand behind her back to keep it off me, which still didn’t look fantastic, I gathered, not to Harper.

*Dear God.* This couldn’t be happening.

Harper began backing away, shaking her head.

“No!” I took off after her, adrenaline pumping. “No, no, no! Harper!”

I made it up the stairs fast enough for the guest room door to be slammed in my face. I jiggled the knob. Locked. Of course.

“Harper?” I rapped my fist to the door. “Come on, baby, open up.”

Shuffling on the other side. What was she doing?



“Open the door, Harper. Talk to me.”

Nothing but more movement, drawers opening, the sound of a zipper. Was she packing?

The hinges rattled as I beat my fist to the barrier between us. “Harper, I’m serious! Open the door, please, baby, please talk to me. Don’t do this.”

“Go away!” she railed from the other side.

My pulse was all over the place, pounding in my ears, raising my body temperature.

“You don’t know what you saw. It wasn’t—she wasn’t...” At a loss for words, I pushed my forehead to the door, shut my eyes. Tried to breathe, even though my lungs felt deflated. “Please, baby. Please open the door.”

“Lawson? Is everything okay?”

My gaze shot to the bottom of the stairs, where Jenna stood with a hand on the rail.

“Maybe I should try to talk to her?” she offered, but I knew better.

“Get out of my house.” I wasn’t a violent man, by any means, but it was all I could do to keep my composure. “Now.”

“Lawson...” She started up the stairs.

“I said Get. Out!”

She jumped, whipped around, and scrambled for the front door. Guilt ripped through my gut, but I immediately pushed it aside. I couldn’t worry about anyone else’s feelings.

“Harper?” I set a palm to the door, feeling as if my world was collapsing out from beneath me. “Open the door, so we can talk. Please. What you saw outside—”

The door flung open, and I stepped back, nearly toppling over.

Waterlogged lashes framed the eyes staring me down like a traitor. Tears carved paths down her cheeks. The pert nose I adored was red and swollen. Her lips—those full lips I couldn’t get enough of kissing, trembled so prettily my heart gave at the seams.

Her breaths were ragged, her chest bouncing as if she was internally moving heaven and earth *not* to cry.

“Harper.” I took a step toward her, but she threw up a palm.

“Please.” Her hand moved to join the other, which was gripping the handle of her suitcase. “I don’t want to hear anything. I just...” She expelled a watery breath. “I just want to leave, okay? No fighting.”

“I don’t want to fight, either, Harper, but if you would just listen—”

“I don’t need to, Lawson. I have eyes.”

“But what you saw—”

“Was your ex-girlfriend wrapped in your arms? The one *who loved you for one more moment, so you wouldn’t have to own it, that you’d lost your everything...* did I get the lyrics right?”

She did. But I never thought hearing my own words, words meant to heal me, to possibly heal others, could feel like knives driving into my ears. “Babe...”

“You wrote songs about her, too, Lawson. Your fans love them. And her.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“A year. Less, actually.”

But it felt like a lifetime. A version of myself I not only no longer connected with but that I wished I could go back and give a few life lessons to. Assure him that it was going to be okay. He didn’t have to change for someone else. He was enough—had *always* been enough.

Desperation pounded inside my chest. “Don’t do this.”

“I called an Uber.” She moved past me for the stairs, and I let her, because I was an idiot and because I couldn’t see the logic in stopping her when she was determined. Harper’s dad may have been in jail, she may have been eighteen and pregnant, but she was also the most headstrong woman I’d ever met. She kept her shoulders squared as she descended the stairs, her chin up. Regal as a duchess abdicating her seat.

“You can’t leave.” I followed her. “There’s an eviction notice on your door, the hearing’s probably soon, if it hasn’t already passed.”

“I’ll get a hotel room.”

“With what? You don’t have a credit card.”

At the landing, she turned on me, eyes flashing. “How do you know what I do and don’t have? How do you even know about the eviction notice?”

“Because I pay people to know things and report them, when it’s important, and you not having a home, other than here with me, is kind of important.”

“For your information, I do have a credit card—my father’s, that he left me for emergencies.”

“Which doesn’t work, because your father pled guilty to a felony and is about to spend several years in prison.”

Her eyes grew rounder. “What did you say?”

I knew what she meant, but I was desperate to stop her from leaving. “Your dad’s credit card probably won’t work,” I said gently.

“Not that. You said he pled guilty and is serving a jail sentence. How do you know that?”

“Like I said, I have people around me who know things and report them, when it’s important.”

“When it’s important.” Tears filled her eyes. “I have to go.” *Sniffle.* “I named the puppy Bella, by the way.”

*Bella.*

I went after her. “Harper, you can’t walk away. After all that’s happened between us, you can’t...” But she was still walking. “Harper!”

She stopped at the door, back ramrod straight. Her shoulders rose and fell with every labored breath. I’d done this to her. Somehow, I’d messed everything up. Broken her trust. But there wasn’t a chance in hell I wasn’t going to fight with all I had to try and fix it.

“Please.” The word exhaled out of me. “Please don’t walk away from us. I love you.”

For a moment, she was silent. Staring at the door, the strap of her laptop bag slung over one shoulder, her small hands gripping her

ridiculous pink suitcase.

Then she said the words that reopened the wound on my stitched heart.

“I love you, too, Lawson.” She glanced at me from over her shoulder. “That’s why I have to leave.”

## chapter twenty-seven

*Harper*

I ALWAYS THOUGHT it was more than a little stupid when people talked about having a broken heart. Like it was physically impossible for your heart to break. It wasn't made of glass. It wasn't made of stone. It was a large muscle that pumped because the brain told it to. Maybe it could tear, sure, but a pretty traumatic event would have to happen. A fatal car wreck, jumping off a high rise or, perhaps, a knife aimed at exactly the right spot.

Apparently, I'd suffered the latter.

This hurt.

This hurt like I'd not only been stabbed in the heart but gutted all the way through. Entrails, blood, guts and gore splayed out on the cement, making passersby gag and children scream.

Note to Self: Do not use horror movies as an antidote to depression.

Problem was the alternative had my mind wandering not to another genre of film but to my laptop, which led to social media and all the videos that'd given me an education on Lawson Hill. Out of the question.

The landlord had mercy on me, allowed me to pay prorated rent in order to stay in the house for the next couple of weeks. The plane ticket was already booked, a one-way trip to the start of a new chapter. Since

on-campus housing came fully furnished, there was no need to shop for dormitory supplies. A blessing, since I'd spent a good chunk of my savings to not only keep a roof over my head but also for the storage unit that now housed the life Dad and I had built over the last eighteen years. Beds, dressers, tables, boxes of knickknacks and Dad's books.

Savana had orchestrated all that. Pulled together a team of boys—Luke, Easton and several of their musician buddies—who came over, moved everything via their long bed, big-tired trucks, and accepted sandwiches and lemonade as payment.

Now, there was nothing left to do but wait.

"I'll have to get a job," I said as Savana painted her toenails in my bedroom, empty save for the twin air mattress I'd picked up after we'd put everything in storage.

"Maybe there's a coffee shop or something nearby." She blew on her toes. Started another coat of electric blue polish. "From what I've heard, everything's pretty much within walking distance, right?"

I shrugged, turned the page of the *Nashville Lifestyles* magazine I'd found in one of the closets as I was boxing up Dad's clothes. "Guess so."

"Just make sure you've got pepper spray."

"Don't worry. I probably won't be leaving my room much, otherwise."

"You'll have a roommate right?" Chris was lying on the floor on her stomach, legs in the air and crossed at the ankles, scanning through her Instagram feed. "Maybe you guys can play chess together or bridge or something. What do British people do for fun?"

"I'm pretty sure they do most of the things we do, with a few exceptions," I said.

"Like playing chess and bridge?" Savana winked, fanned her toes.

"Regardless," I said, "roommates aren't allowed."

Chris's eyes met mine. "You mean you're gonna be there all alone? That's horrible."

“It’s not that horrible.” I flipped the page. “I’ll have too much studying to do to worry about socializing, anyway.”

“Yeah, but how are you supposed to meet a hot British guy?” Chris blinked owlishly at me.

She was a hundred and fifty percent serious.

My mouth opened, to speak, to laugh, to cry. Those days, there was no way of knowing. My emotions were all over the place. I’d gone to a gynecologist, who promptly confirmed the pregnancy but added it was still early and I’d need to find a doctor once I arrived in England. Since then, reality had begun to sink in, much like I’d jumped into a great body of water and was slowly, slowly drifting down with no chance of seeing the surface again.

This was my life.

I was moving forward, pregnant, with no one to rely upon but myself.

Savana let out a snort. “Yeah, okay, as if that’s ever going to happen.”

Chris raised up further on her elbows. “Why wouldn’t it? Harper’s gorgeous, even if she is American.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said, turning another page. *How to Get a Spot at Nashville’s Most Prestigious Open Mic Night*. My thoughts drifted back to the night at the café downtown. When I got to experience the magic that was Lawson Hill performing with just a guitar and a sack full of southern boy charm.

“I mean, Lawson’s not gonna just sit back,” said Savana. “He may be a nice guy, but it’s not in him to not fight for what he wants.”

Chris’s mouth ticked. “He is kinda scrappy.” She wasn’t wrong.

Lawson had sent at least fifty texts, begging me to speak to him. To give him a chance to explain. I didn’t want an explanation. I didn’t think my heart could take it. He obviously still had feelings for his ex. And I had a future ahead of me. I couldn’t play tug-a-war against the woman who, for over three years, had carved herself into his life.

I couldn't be that girl.

I wouldn't.

"He said he stopped by." Savana tightened the nail polish cap and set it to the side. Her gaze latched onto mine. "Just a couple of days ago, too."

"Wait." Chris sat up, set her phone down. "He did?"

I looked away, scraped my teeth across my lower lip. Stared at the magazine page filled with meaningless words and photographs. When he'd shown up on my doorstep, rang the doorbell, knocked again and again, pleaded with me to *please, please, Harper, open up*, I'd almost caved. I missed him. Wanted him. Wanted his arms around me, his lips in my hair, and his beautiful voice telling me everything was going to be okay.

I had it bad for him.

No, that wasn't true.

I *loved* him.

Which was terrible, really, because, historically, the men I loved tended to disappoint me in ways that left my entire world shattered.

"Let me in, Harper." He sounded tired. Like he'd deliberately kept himself up for days. "Please. I miss you."

I'd pressed my forehead and palms to the door, imagining him on the steps outside. Imagining what he'd do if I turned the knob, what words he'd weave or if he'd say anything at all. Heaven knew he didn't have to. He had that much power over me. The power to make me forget myself with a single sweep of his gaze. It was a little embarrassing, what those eyes of his did to me. But I needed to get a grip on my emotions. And, apparently, my libido, which had skyrocketed since six pregnancy sticks had popped *positive*.

"If I let you in, Lawson," I'd told him, my voice dark and foreign, even to my own ears, "my heart wouldn't survive it." It wouldn't. At least I was strong enough to admit the truth. "Please. Please go away."

My phone rang, yanking me from my reverie.



“Hey, that’s your weird Ohio area code.” Savana tossed the cell from where I’d left it on the air mattress. I caught it. “Maybe it’s about your dad?”

“I don’t know.” I swiped the screen. “Hello?”

Silence. Faint voices on the other end.

“Hello?” If this was another political call, I swore I’d scream.

“Harper?”

*Dad.*

I got to my feet so fast my head spun. “Dad?”

Savana and Chris exchanged wide-eyed glances.

“Hey, sport.”

“Dad, I...I can’t believe it’s you. You’re calling me.” Emotion rose in my throat. “We’re talking.”

He let out a strained laugh. “Not for long, I’m afraid. They only allow so much time for phone calls.”

“How are you?”

“I’m...here. For now, anyway. Waiting for my sentencing date, after which they’ll probably move me to a minimum security.”

I couldn’t believe I was talking about prison with my dad. My dad, who had raised me by himself, pushed me to be the best, to never give up. The dad who was now incarcerated for committing an act I never would’ve dreamed him capable of. Not my straightlaced, by the book, rule-abiding father. It was still too much to process.

I wrapped an arm around my belly, hugging my waist. “Who was she, Dad?”

His breath hitched. For a moment I thought he didn’t mean to answer. Maybe I should’ve led with another question. There were so many. Too many. And yet *who was she* was the one dangling at the forefront of my mind. Followed by *why* and *how could you* and *what am I supposed to do with a dad in prison?*

“A mistake.” His exhale rolled over phone. “A foolish, foolish mistake.”

“Why wouldn’t you see me? I was there, you know. In Columbus?”

“I know. But at the time I just couldn’t. I couldn’t let you...” A shaky breath. “I couldn’t let you see me like this, sport. Bad enough I had to lie to you.”

“Wrong. You didn’t have to lie. You could’ve told me. You could’ve returned my phone calls, given me more than vague responses and...and lies, Dad. You *lied* to me.” Emotion stretched across my chest, constricting. My hands shook. “I had to find out from a sheriff. Can you even imagine how freaking scary that was? How terrifying?”

“I can imagine, yes.”

“Then why?” I paced the room. “Why did you lie?”

“Because I’m so proud of you, Harper. Do you know that? I’m so proud of you. No father could be prouder. And I’d failed you. I *have* failed you tremendously, and there was no way to fix it. No way to take back the choices I’d made, no matter how foolish and potentially disastrous.”

I let out a humorless snort. “Disastrous. Is that what this is?”

“I’d say so, yes. My lawyer says I’m looking at five to six years, maybe less depending on good behavior.”

*Five years.* Five years behind the bars of a prison cell. No freedom. No purpose, at least not as he had before, to educate, impart knowledge on others. He was always wildly passionate about teaching. In fact, the school had awarded him so many Teacher of the Year awards, it’d become a running joke of who’d beat out John Evans, if anybody. Everybody loved him. It was part of the reason why I hardly blinked an eye when he’d said he had to go back to help transition the new hire.

When he’d lied.

“Of course, my career is over,” he said. “No one will ever want to hire a guy with a felony on his resume.”

“Correction. No school will hire a licensed teacher who had an affair with his student.”

“That, too.” There was a stretched pause, and I thought maybe the line had died. But then he inhaled and said, “Every day, I think about what I could’ve done differently. From...*her*, to keeping the truth from you. I’m so sorry, Harper. If you could only understand how sorry I am.”

“I don’t know what to say.” I’d always been good with words. I read, studied, understood and retained faster than most of the other kids in class. I’d written essays that not only earned perfect scores but wound up tacked to the classroom corkboard. However, words did not exist for this. Words couldn’t convey how I felt inside.

I’d lost my father. Whether for five to six years or forever, I didn’t know. Turned out there were no words for that, either.

“You don’t have to say anything, sport. Your friend told me you’re doing well.”

My friend? Who—?

“That you’re still planning to go to college, and you’ve been in touch with accommodations. I’m so proud of you,” he said again. “So proud.”

“Who told you?” I asked.

“I thought you knew.” He cleared his throat. “Your friend, Mr. Hill, came to see me yesterday.”

My heart. Oh my gosh, my heart sank deep in my stomach. I put a hand to my gaping mouth.

“I hadn’t planned to accept any visitors, of course, but the warden insisted it was urgent. You can imagine my surprise. Of all people, he was the last one I expected to see waiting at the table.”

“Lawson.” I swallowed. “Lawson came to see you?” Savana gasped, her hands popping over her mouth. “Why?”

“To remind me what I fool I was for refusing to speak to my own daughter.”

Hot tears filled my eyes and I leaned back against the nearest wall for support.

“To remind me that no man’s pride is worth holding over the love of his family. And you’re my family, Harper. You’re all I’ve got in this world. And knowing you’re still moving forward with your plans for an education? That makes me so happy.” He chuckled softly. “I gotta say, I’m more than a little amazed by the support you have in that boy. He’s damned proud of you, too, and apparently a pretty big deal. Few of the other inmates were telling me he’s won awards and tours all over the world.”

If might’ve laughed, if I could’ve mustered one, which I couldn’t.

Lawson had flown to Ohio to talk to my dad. He’d done that. For me.

“Time’s up,” he said, and I blinked rapidly. Straightened. There was still so much to talk about, so much I wanted to say, to ask. “I’ll reach out again, okay? At least let you know where I end up, so you can come see me. You know. If you want.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “I’d like that.”

“Okay. You take care, sport. I love you.”

Fresh tears pricked my eyes. “I love you, too, Dad.”

The line went dead, and I pressed my phone to my chest. Shut my eyes, leaned my head back against the wall. My heart was beating so fast, my mind racing.

Chris and Savana were at my side in milliseconds, rubbing my arms, smoothing my hair.

“Are you okay?” asked Savana. “Do you need me to get you anything?”

“Water?” Chris chimed in. “Juice? Vodka?”

“She can’t drink vodka, goober.” Savana’s sweet southern drawl curled around my emotions, calming me by degrees. “She’s havin’ a baby.”

“Oh, right.” Chris’s eyebrows stitched together with concern. “Seriously, though. Are you okay?”

“Honestly?” I lifted a shoulder. “I’m not sure.”

The doorbell rang and the three of us exchanged bewildered glances.

“Did you order food, Chris?” asked Savana. Then, addressing me, she said, “Chris always orders takeout during life’s crises. Usually Chinese.”

“Szechuan chicken works miracles!” Chris blew on her freshly painted green nails. “Proven fact. It’s already paid for, could someone get it? I don’t wanna mess up my manicure.”

Since I was the only one not doing her nails, I volunteered, padded to the front door. Braced myself for the waft of food that may or may not bring on a bout of nausea. I could never tell. Some scents were fine. Spearmint, grass, syrup—all good. But others. Bacon, onions, anything fried. Made me sicker than the one time in my life I had a stomach virus.

I didn’t check the peephole.

I flipped the lock, opened the door.

And there he was.

Looking cleanly handsome in jeans and a pale beige Henley. His eyes were darker somehow, a stark contrast to his styled blond hair. My heart responded immediately. A rhythm no one commanded but him.

“Hey.” His gaze searched mine. “Can I come in?”

## chapter twenty-eight

ONCE THE SHOCK wore off, I stepped aside. Held the door open for Lawson. He smiled wistfully at me as he walked in.

Here we were again. In each other's space. Breathing the same air. I wasn't prepared. Sure, there were a million things I wanted to say, another million I wanted to ask. But I hadn't aligned a single thought. It'd been a week since I left, and I still couldn't make sense of anything.

Silence whirled around the space between us. I hadn't noticed how empty the house looked. No furniture, no photos or paintings. No smells floating in from the kitchen. Lawson shifted on his feet, gazing around, and his movements echoed off the bare walls.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked. "Water?"

He shook his head. "Saw Chris's car outside. She here?"

"She and Savana—"

"—were just leaving." Savana and Chris came bounding down the stairs. Chris was still blowing on her nails. How long had they been watching? "Hey, Law." Savana moved to kiss him on the cheek, and he inclined his head, letting her.

Chris patted his arm. "See you next week, okay?"

Lawson nodded but didn't answer. His eyes were on me. Careful, steady. As if he might look at me wrong and shatter me into a million pieces.

Savana gripped my shoulder, kissed my cheek. "Text me."

"K."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

The moment the door shut, and Lawson and I were alone, he said, "I had an entire monologue worked out in my..." He whirled a finger close to his head. "But naturally I'm at a loss for words."

"Yet here you are."

He bit his bottom lip. "Yeah."

"Should we sit?"

Amusement played a gorgeous tune on his features as he looked around. "On what space of floor?"

Nervous, I moved for the stairs, sat on the second-to-last step. Tucked my hands between my knees.

He did the same, added space between us, although there wasn't much. I could still reach out and touch him. Could easily call to memory his warmth, the responsive sounds he made. The sense of safety when I was wrapped in his arms.

"Maybe I should start," I offered.

His brows arched.

"You went to see my dad."

He rubbed his palms down his thighs. "Yeah."

"Why?"

His brows snapped back down again. "Why?"

"You don't owe me anything."

Sunlight sifting in from a window glinted off his hair. He smiled, not happily but as if he was forcing down a bottomless glass of fortitude. "You still don't get it, do you?"

A mere handful of words spoken between us in days and already I was agitated with him. "Get what?"

His gaze could've cut through steel. "Why do you think I went to see your dad?"

Now we were playing twenty questions? I sighed, frustrated. “To get him to talk to me?”

He shook his head. “To wake him up.”

I blinked at him, confused.

“We have a finite amount of time on this earth, Harper. Finite. Tomorrow? Doesn’t exist. We make plans, decisions, but in reality, there’s no guarantee we’ll draw our next breath. So, why in the hell would we spend even a second wasted in fear, hate, self-loathing or, I don’t know...” His shoulders lifted and fell. “Not showing the people we love how much they mean to us?”

Warmth wove through me, a soft, glowing ember I’d managed to keep suppressed. Being this close to him, it pulsed and crackled, eager to burst into a full-blown, raging fire.

“So, ask me again,” he said. “Why did I go see your dad?”

I tilted my head in question. *Why?*

“Because I love you, Harper. Because telling you will never be enough.” His throat muscles contracted. “Not for me.”

Our eyes held, his full of kindness and patience. My high school English/Lit teacher, the same one who spent an entire semester on Shakespeare, told us once that there were old souls walking the earth. Moving past the rest of us in our infancy, observing what they’d already seen but through a new pair of eyes.

I’d thought it before, that Lawson was an old soul. No other explanation made sense for the wisdom he conveyed in every glance, every gesture. Every word that came out of his mouth.

He said, “And what I feel here?” He set a hand to his chest. “An involuntary urge to never stop showing you how much. So, yeah, I visited your dad.” Pausing, he asked, “He called you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I’m glad he did.”

“What about you?” I asked. “The reporters, the venues you had scheduled. Has anyone come around?” Wasn’t until after I’d asked the



question, I realized I was afraid to know the answer.

He shrugged, look at his hands. “Not yet.”

Seconds passed in silence.

“Does Jenna know?” I asked.

Confusion contorted his features. “What?”

“Does Jenna know you’re here?”

He blinked rapidly. “Harper.”

“*Does* she?”

“I don’t think so, but you need to understand—”

“I need to understand?” My face heated. My fingers dug into my knees. “I need to understand?”

“Yes.” He was so calm. “You need to understand that what you think you saw was in reality nothing at all. Nothing.”

My lips trembled. “I saw you.” Outside. By his truck. Wrapped up in each other. The look on Jenna’s face, as if she’d suddenly gotten all she’d ever wanted. “You were holding her.”

“Was I?”

“If memory serves—and it *does*—we were all there, Lawson.”

“Is that what you really saw?” He sounded choked, as if, like me, he was on the brink of tears.

I opened my mouth to speak, to scream, *Yes! Yes! That’s exactly what I saw!* But as if by Lawson’s command, my mind rewound the film reel, plunking me back to the exact time and place when I saw them from the kitchen doorway.

Lawson leaning back against his tailgate.

Jenna with her arms thrown around him.

Lawson with his arms...

Lawson with his...

Jenna’s body was smashed against his, no space between them.

Lawson was...

I pulled in a shaky breath.

“Harper.”

Tears drew a misty veil over my eyes.

“There is no me and Jenna,” he said. “That guy you met at the awards show, the one who sat next to you when I got up to take the stage? He’s the reason why—well, part of the reason.”

I felt my brow crinkle. “How?”

“He played backup guitar for the band Jenna was singing lead for at the time, when we were...” He drew in a breath, exhaled. Rubbed his hands together, slowly. “We never really talked, him and me. In passing, sure, and mostly about guitar, until the day he called me, out of the blue, to tell me that Jenna had been seeing someone else.”

His eyes found mine. Pain coursed through my chest, sudden, raw. Protective. I was protective over him. Maybe I hadn’t realized until then—I was fairly certain I at least hadn’t realized the magnitude of it—but there it was. A deep-seated discomfort, a stewing anger toward anyone who would dare hurt him.

“Who was he?” I asked.

He broke my gaze, shook his head. Flicked a piece of lint from his jean-covered knee. “Can’t remember his name. Just that he was bigger than me.”

“Bigger.”

“You know.” His hands indicated the space of air on either side of his shoulders. “Taller. Beefier. Gym rat.”

“So, what you’re saying is she left you for a muscle-head.” It was almost comical. Almost.

“Hey, if the roles were reversed, I might’ve left me for a guy with big guns. Lot less complicated than—” he tapped a finger to his temple “—whatever’s usually goin’ on up here.”

“Less complicated, more arrogant,” I said, and he shrugged.

“Regardless, the filler-guy you sat next to in Vegas was just a catalyst. An important one, sure, but it would’ve only been a matter of

time for me and her. Looking back,” he said, “on the aftermath that brought about uncertainty and self-doubt, both of which finally, finally turned into one eye-opening realization...” He slowly shook his head. “That wasn’t love, Harper.”

“What realization?” I was breathless, incapable of breaking his stare.

“That I’d spent too many years trying to be someone else. Some version of a guy who bent and molded himself to please another person. I used to think that was an attribute, you know?” His laugh was soft, his smile faint. That smile did far more to me than a smile should’ve. “I remember telling a reporter once that if you didn’t like me, it was on you, not me, because I had a knack for accommodating people.”

I huffed a laugh and a tear escaped. “You do that.”

“But in the space between letting go, being alone and then...you,” he said, shaking his head, “I discovered something pretty amazing.”

“What?”

“That I like myself.”

Lawson had always been open with me. In fact, never once in the short time we were together had I felt he wasn’t being completely honest. I hadn’t stopped to think maybe he wasn’t always so unguarded. That he’d once hidden who he was to make someone else happy. Sure, Savana had mentioned it. Katie, too. But hearing him say it, here and now? A welcome slice of truth.

“I can’t imagine anyone not liking you for who you are,” I said. “You’re the most wonderful person I’ve ever met.”

“Harper.” I couldn’t remember if I’d ever seen him blush. He was so used to the attention, the compliments on his looks, his values, the gentleness he exuded in everything he did. But he was. He was blushing.

“Which is why I still have to leave, Lawson.” My heart thudded in my ears. “I have to.”

His gaze snapped to mine. “No,” he said. “No, you don’t.”

“I can’t be the one who takes you away from your dreams,” I said and kept going even as he looked away, shaking his head. “I can’t be the one who damages the career you’ve worked so hard for. You’ve earned everything you have, Lawson, and you deserve the world.” My eyes pooled with fresh tears. “And if your success means I have to watch from a distance, then that’s what I’m going to do. Because I care for you. Because I want you to have everything in life that you’ve ever dreamed of —”

“I want *you*,” he interrupted. He took my hands in his, grasped tightly. “Don’t you understand? None of that even matters if you’re not here to share it with me.”

I eased my hands free, folded them in my lap. “They’ll never let go of what my dad did. Not anytime soon, at least. And the crazy thing is? I get it. They want what’s best for you.”

“Shouldn’t I at least get a say in that?”

“In a perfect world?” Yeah, he should’ve. But our world wasn’t perfect. And his was on another stratosphere, one most of us only caught glimpses of every now and again. Never too close to touch.

“You don’t have to make decisions for me,” he said.

“No.” I inhaled a shaky breath. “But I have to make decisions for me.” Rising, I whispered, “You should go.”

He stood, too. Followed me as I made for the front door. “You’re having my baby, Harper.”

The hint of anger in his tone stilled me. I turned, looked at him. “I won’t keep you from your child, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

His head shook slowly from side to side. His eyes never left my own. “That’s not at all what I’m worried about. You’ll be a good mother. I have no doubt. And, yes, of course I want to be a part of our child’s life. But that’s the thing. I want to be a part of your life, too, and I want you in mine.”

“That *is* the thing, Lawson. Me being in your life means you lose yours. Did you think I wasn’t listening when Katie and everyone else told

you your new music was the best they'd heard from you—ever? That the industry is still buzzing after your last performance? How could you think I'd be okay with that? How would that make me any better than Jenna?"

"You honestly believe I care more about the music than I do about my family?"

"I believe your future is too bright for you not to shine."

I kept telling myself that one day he would thank me. My dad had years left in prison. While it stood to reason the news would die down soon enough, that reasoning wouldn't apply if I stayed with Lawson. They would keep dredging it up. Slapping it in everyone's faces—a reminder that of all the women in the world Lawson Hill could choose to be with, he'd picked the daughter of a criminal. His firmly established, wholesome image would forever be tarnished.

No.

I couldn't do that to him.

I wouldn't.

"Please, Lawson," I said, teeth chattering uncontrollably. "You have to go."

And he did.

With one last look at me, the same sad smile he'd worn when I'd opened the door to him imbedded in my memory, he walked away.

## chapter twenty-nine

I DIDN'T KNOW WHY I'd agreed to go. The heat was unforgiving. One of the hottest projected for the summer, the radio deejay had said on the drive over to the festival grounds. I wore the jean miniskirt I'd picked up on my first shopping trip with Savana, a tank with *Rock Royalty* splayed across my boobs, and my faithful, tatty pair of Chucks. Hair up in a ponytail and minimal makeup, I blended in with thousands of other festivalgoers.

Or so I thought.

Recognition raised a few glances. Couples leaned into each other. Looks ensued. Curiosity, disgust, back to curiosity. For weeks, my face had been plastered alongside Lawson's all over the internet. However, most didn't spare me a second glance. Too busy drinking, dancing, laughing, I was one in a sea who'd come to see live performances by some of the best artists in the business. I wasn't special. Savana and Chris stayed close to my side, the three of us holding hands as we maneuvered through the crush toward the stage.

We'd arrived at exactly the right time. People were already chanting his name. *Law-son! Law-son! Law-son!*

An MC in jeans, boots and a backwards cap took the microphone and said, dramatic as an announcer in a boxing ring, "We're here, people!" He thrust his hand in the air, which was gripping a red Solo

cup. The crowd cheered, whooped and hollered. “We’re here and it’s time for our main event! It’s time for our headliner. He is a multi-time Grammy, Billboard, CMA and ACM winner. With fourteen number one singles, albums that have sold more than sixty-million copies. Ladies and gentlemen, coming to the stage is a recording artist I am honored to call my friend. Please give a warm, Nashville welcome to Lawson Hill!”

The music began with strings. Playful violins that led into synthesizers that led into a drumbeat that led to a storm of deafening screams. The girl next to me was crying. A whole line of girls in front of us counted to three and yelled, “WE LOVE YOU LAWSON!” A few boos inserted themselves into to the mix. People who were clearly still upset with him. But even they couldn’t take their eyes off the stage. Because there he was, walking confidently, taking front-and-center in black jeans and a gray t-shirt, and carrying his signature white electric guitar.

The storm raged into a hurricane.

His fingers slid down the fret board and the band joined in on *Insanity*, one of the more upbeat songs he’d written only weeks ago.

I listened. Of course, I did. It was impossible not to. His talent shone like a flame, like sunlight pushing over mountaintops. But beyond that, I knew who he was. The small-town boy turned successful musician. The brilliant young man with a servant’s heart. The human being who had touched me in more ways than anyone ever had and, I feared, ever would.

He sang every note with clear perfection.

He engaged the crowd, urging them to clap to the beat.

He smiled the smile that had nearly every female in the crowd screaming like their hearts were exploding. The smile the world recognized. The smile I knew was more genuine than the most expensive diamond.

He’d told me there was nothing between him and Jenna. It didn’t matter. If he chose her, if he didn’t. If they reconnected, if that ship had

sailed. I had no right to worry either way. Our handful of weeks together had yielded fires and floods. Passion and turmoil. Joy and inexplicable heartbreak.

Yes, I'd had the time of my life.

Yes, I'd accepted I'd never feel this way for another man ever again.

Yes, I was carrying his child. Our child. The child we'd made together, he and I.

Yes, I was still in love with him.

But one glance at him on stage, shining in his element, stoking a jam-packed crowd into a magnified roar, solidified my conviction that none of it mattered. Me, Jenna, our time together, the baby I'd meet in the spring.

Lawson belonged to the sky. A big, beautiful, unreachable sky scattered with stars and mysteries the rest of us couldn't comprehend.

The war I'd conceded by letting him go was more necessity than mercy. The only casualty? The muscle stuttering beneath my ribcage.

Savana looped her arm around my waist, laid her head on my shoulder. She'd been such a good friend. Setting me up with Lawson or, as it were, setting him up with me in hope that I would somehow spark his dormant muse into action. She'd meant well. And her plan had worked. Sort of. What she probably didn't bank on was what none of us had.

That the spark would blaze.

"This was a mistake." I said it more to myself than to anyone who might be listening. Because it was. I shouldn't have come. Should've trusted my instincts that I wasn't ready. That I'd never be ready, not as long as there was breath in my lungs and he still walked the earth.

"What do you mean?" Savana semi-yelled above Lawson's soaring vocals. "I thought you wanted to come!"

I had. I did. But seeing him was too much. Hearing him sing, speak, knowing I'd erected the wall between us, brick by brick, I couldn't put



myself through this. Not anymore.

“I have to go.”

I turned to leave, and Savana caught me by the elbow. “Wait!”

The crack in my heart had already begun to widen. The air capacity in my lungs had already begun to weaken. All around us, thousands of people danced, screamed and thrust their hands in the air. One would’ve thought we were at a rock concert—the energy was unbelievable.

And yet all mine had vanished.

I needed to go. Needed to *let* go. Move on. Start fresh. Was that even possible?

“Your plane doesn’t leave until tonight!” She searched my face, frantic. “You have time!”

“Look around you!” I gazed across the sea of heads to the stage. To him. My heart was slamming itself against my ribcage. “He deserves this, we both know it. To hold him back would be selfish. You’re one of his best friends—like a sister!”

I hated shouting, but Savana was leaning as close to me as she could in order to hear about the cacophony.

“This is what you wanted for him, remember?” I said. “And it’s okay to be happy to see him achieving his dreams. I mean that. But for now, our worlds are too far apart, Savana, I...” I shook my head, blinked back another onslaught of tears. “It can’t work between us. It just can’t.” My bottom lip trembled. “I have to go.”

And, so, I did.

I left without another word. Without looking back.

With his voice in my ears.

In my head.

In my heart.

## chapter thirty

### *three weeks later...*

FINDING BALANCE. That seemed to be my MO. Scratch that, my *only* MO since I arrived in England. Classes were fine. Hectic but surreal, I still couldn't believe I'd gotten in to one of the most prestigious schools in the world. People were nice, despite the stereotypes. Despite that I was an American and, therefore, given leeway to screw up local customs and British slang, the latter of which I still couldn't grasp.

Apparently, in the UK, *fanny* wasn't a cute reference to one's backside.

The university campus was a dream. Like a medieval castle sprung to life inside and out with upgraded technology throughout. Portraits of famous alumni dotted the walls. Sir Isaac Newton, Lord Rayleigh and James Clerk Maxwell, to name a few. The canteen where I took most of my meals had WiFi and a wider selection of food than most cafes in the States. Housing was quaint but nice, my room small but accommodating. I'd hung out a few times with some of the first years who lived on the same floor. Four of us shared a kitchen down the hall, though Lara, the self-labeled farmgirl from Norfolk, was the only one who ever cooked.

I'd yet to find a job, although I'd put in applications almost everywhere within walking distance: a coffee shop, two cafes and a

secondhand bookstore. I was really hopeful about the last. I needed a happy distraction. What better than to surround oneself with the scent of pages and binding, shelves packed with books from floor to ceiling, and to get paid for it?

In the space between waiting for a call from the bookshop owner, partially ignoring Lawson's texts—I made myself answer only baby-related questions—the last of which cryptically read, *remember, you forced me to do this*, and trekking Great Court to and from classes, I spent most of my time in my room. Studying, doing homework, sleeping, and, of course, wondering how in the hell I was going to erase the last few months from my memory.

I wanted to forget. I didn't want to forget. There was no rhyme to my weird, messed up reasoning.

I'd garnered a few second glances. Whether because I wasn't completely bad-looking or because I was so obviously not British, was anyone's guess. Being an American wasn't exactly high on the exotic scale. Nonetheless, I'd been asked out a couple of times. Handsome guys, well-dressed and -groomed, with pretty smiles. British, obviously, which wasn't a bad thing. Their accents sounded musical, educated and gorgeous. Like Harry Styles without the drama.

I'd declined.

Life needed to go on. The past belonged in the past. I needed to move forward—only forward, never backward.

But my heart was still tender.

And I was still pregnant.

I wouldn't've felt right going out with a boy, even if it was just an innocent cup of coffee, without telling him the truth. It would've been a lot to take for anyone. Lara was the only soul on campus who knew, besides the guidance counselor and accommodations. I couldn't live in a single room dormitory with an infant. Luckily, the university had off-campus flats for students with significant others or, in my case, a child.

There was a waiting list, of course, but maybe if the stars could align for the bookstore gig, they'd align for this, too.

A light knock came to my door as I was sitting on the bed doing homework. It was a Saturday, raining cats and dogs, and most everyone had gone to the common room for games and television. Except me, of course. Per usual, I was content to bury myself in work.

"Come in," I said without looking up.

"Ugh, why am I not surprised?"

"Hi, Lara." I kept writing my discussion notes on *Wuthering Heights*. "Yes, I'm studying." She loved to give me crap about choosing to do homework while other people actually had fun. You know. Like *normal* college kids.

"I made you a snack." She lifted a covered plate. "Banoffee pie."

"Nice. Thanks." I gestured to my desk. "There is fine. What are you up to?"

Shrugging, she sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh, you know. Baking, played a round of cards with Jim." Jim was her boyfriend, a third-year astrology major who gushed about stars and planets the way most boys talked about sports. "Mainly wondering why my new American friend insists upon being antisocial."

"I'm not antisocial."

She tilted her head. Lara was gorgeous. Tall and thin with long braids, deep brown eyes and cinnamon skin, she looked like a movie star. When I first met her, I would've never guessed she'd grown up on a sheep farm with, as she put it, mad sheering and milking skills.

"Fine," she said. "Uncultured."

I slapped my pen to the notebook page that was almost full. "I'll have you know I'm plenty cultured!"

She rolled her eyes. "Great. Let's hear it."

"Hear what?"

"All the ways you're cultured."

I blinked rapidly, thinking. "I...like football?"

“*American* football.”

“And baseball.” This was so ridiculous.

“Again. American.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “So, cultured only counts when it’s British culture?”

“Well, to be fair, you *are* in Britain.” Her mouth screwed up to one side. “But you never get out.”

“It’s cold all the time.” I rubbed my arms. “I’m cold all the time.”

“Wear a bloody sweater.” She shoved my leg and I laughed. “Come out with us. You don’t have to drink. We’ll tell everybody it’s against your religion or something.”

I shook my head, laughing. She’d kept my secret well. Heck, if it weren’t for Lara, I wouldn’t have eaten half the healthy stuff I did. *Gotta keep that wee lil’ bairn happy*, she’d say in her wonky version of a Scottish accent and hand me a kale-blueberry-acai shake. *Drink up*.

“Seriously, you can’t just stay in here forever, pining over him.”

Blood rushed up my cheeks, and I ducked my head, brow pulling. It hurt. *He* hurt. The memory of him, of us, of all we’d meant to each other. “Pining over who?”

“The boy who clearly broke your heart—good Lord, woman, do you think I’m that dense?”

“I don’t think you’re dense.” I just didn’t think I’d been that obvious. *Was I?*

I’d tried to hide it. Keep myself occupied. The prison in Ohio had arranged weekly visits between me and Dad via Zoom. He never had much to say about himself, but he asked plenty about me. How school was going (great), what I thought of my professors (amazing), whether I was eating good (yes, thanks to Lara). I still hadn’t told him about the baby. Couldn’t for worrying how he’d react, whether he’d withdraw again, go back to not talking to me.

He was the only family I had. I couldn’t lose him.

My phone dinged with a text. Savana. I smiled. She'd kept in touch without fail, sending me funny memes and photos of her and Chris. She left Lawson out of our conversations. I was grateful. Especially since I knew she didn't like the way I ended things. She was my friend, yes, but she'd been Lawson's friend first. Loyalty like that, I couldn't compete with.

*What's up, ladybug?* She inserted a ladybug emoji. *How's Saturday morning in England?*

I texted back: *Great, except it's 4 in the afternoon.*

*Time difference. My bad.*

*It's okay.*

*You chillin'?*

*Sort of. Lara's hanging out with me.*

*Lara! I like Lara. Tell her I said HIIIII!* She sent a selfie of herself blowing a kiss.

I showed Lara, and she laughed. "I have got to meet this girl. She seems fun. A lot more fun than you," she teased.

"She is." A twinge of homesickness tugged at me. Ridiculous, since Nashville was never really home. But there it was. Digging deep. Reaching into my heart.

I pushed the feeling aside. Strength was vital. I knew that. Had convinced myself that the moment I invited in the past, even the good parts, I might as well knock down a wall and wave in a universe of highs and lows and super-lows. The kind that left me watching sap movies and crying into a pint of rocky road.

"She introduced me to..." *Come on, Evans. You can do this.* "To him. To the father."

I cringed a little at the sound of my own words. Could I have been any more impersonal? Then again, *impersonal* was the only trait I'd adopted that kept me going. Sure, it meant I was more robotic than

human—just last week, Lara suggested I needed to change my batteries—but who needed fun and spontaneity?

Lara pushed her hands into her lap. “You were all in the same group of friends?”

“Sort of. Savana and I worked together at the community college library.” I swallowed against the sudden acceleration of my heart. “And one night she invited me to go to a jam session.”

“Jam session.”

“You know, where musicians get together to play and sing?”

Chuckling, Lara said, “I know what a jam session is. I’m just trying to place you sitting around with a bunch of musicians. In Nashville, Tennessee, of all places.”

“You’ve heard of Nashville, huh?”

“Hey, I may be a sheep farmer, but I wasn’t born in a cave. So, your bloke, he’s a musician?”

“He’s not mine.” Why was I so defensive? For a moment, Lawson *was* mine. And I was his, and we were supposed to work out, even though a relationship was proving more and more impossible by the day. It was like attempting to climb a mountain. One where he was already at the top, and I had no way to reach him. No footing, no rope to grab, nada.

“Right. But you shagged him.” Lara’s brows inched toward her hairline. “Apparently more than once, since you got pregnant. Or was it a one-time deal?”

“That’s a little harsh.”

“Trust me, Harper, I’m not judging. Normal relationships are hard enough. Jim and I, we’ve been together for almost a year, shagged on the first date and the second and the third. Broke up, because I told him I didn’t want to base a relationship on sex. He said I was crazy. I told him he could bloody well sod off. But then we got back together, and here we are. Dealing with each other’s own special flavor of crazy.”

I tried and failed to hide my amusement.

“And that’s *normal*!” She laughed. “But dating a bloke with a high profile? That can’t be easy. I mean, sure, do I sometimes dream of getting eat out by Régé-Jean Page or discovering firsthand if all the rumors about Tom Hiddleston’s cock are true? Who doesn’t?”

I laughed so hard I doubled over, my eyes watering.

“Who.” She poked my knee. “Freaking.” Another punctuated poke. “Doesn’t?”

As our combined laughter faded, my thoughts dialed back a frame.

“Wait...” My mouth opened and closed. Words scrambled, attempted to form sentences. “I didn’t tell you he was high profile.” *Blink, blink.* “In fact, we’ve never talked about him until now. I haven’t,” I said slowly, “talked about him.” With anyone. Except, of course, for myself. And only in my head. And only in moments of weakness. Of which there were unfortunately many.

Lara was staring at me in such a way, the hairs on my arms stood on end. “Yeah.” She drew out the word. “That’s true.”

Before I could respond, a shriek echoed in the hall, followed by another and another.

I jerked reactively. Pushed my notebook off my lap. *Wuthering Heights* fell to the floor.

Voices. More high-pitched squeals. What the heck was going on? Was there a fire? Had someone broken in? We all had key cards and were given strict instructions to neither lose nor lend them to anyone, not even friends and family.

Heart pounding, my feet hit the floor and I looked around for a bat, a paperweight, textbook, anything I could use to hit someone over the head, if I had to. Nothing. All my schoolbooks were digital. The two large landscape paintings issued by the school were bolted to the wall. And the baseball bat I’d had since third grade was in storage, along with the other contents of my entire life.

“Harper,” said Lara, “there’s something you need to—”

The knock at the door cut her off.



I grabbed the back of my desk chair, ready to throw it at an intruder.  
“Harper?”

The fight drained out of me, instantaneous. Replaced by an overwhelming plethora of questions, none of which made one iota of sense.

“Harper Evans.” His voice. Smooth, southern. Speaking my name.  
“Open the door.”

I looked to Lara, who shrugged as if to say *what can you do?* “You didn’t have to tell me,” she said. “It was pretty obvious from the second he stepped out of his car and...how did someone put it?” She tapped a finger to her chin. “Stormed across Great Court like Bieber running from a groupie? You really should’ve told me you were dating a hot country star. We could’ve had a whole lot more to talk about.”

“We’re not—”

“Don’t make me break this door down, Harper. I’m serious. It looks like somethin’ close to mahogany or ancient oak or some kind of realistic prop from Game of Thrones, and I’m pretty sure I’d injure a fist or a foot, so why don’t you just save me a whole lotta pain and open—”

I opened the door, and there he was. Here. Or...*there*, as it were. In the hall. On the other side of my room. Real, in person, and looking like a girl’s wet dream in black skinny jeans, a black leather jacket, sunglasses hooked in the unbuttoned collar of a gray Henley. His blond hair was perfectly coiffed, the signature hard part and pompadour that would’ve made James Dean fire his barber. But his equally gorgeous smile was gone, his blue eyes hard, his freshly-shaven jaw set.

“Lawson. What—” A shrill *oh my god, is that really him?* nabbed the words out of my mouth.

Lawson rubbed the back of his neck. “Could I come in, please? It’s gettin’ a little thick out here in the hall.”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry.” I stepped aside. His scent washed over me as he walked past, and I shut my eyes, willed myself to calm down. *Just calm the eff down, Evans.* “I wasn’t expecting to see you. In fact,” I said and

released a nervous laugh, “I thought you were a robber or a rapist or something.”

He turned around, arms open, palms out. His eyes. How could I have forgotten how beautiful his eyes were? How emotional and expressive? “Just me. Flying four thousand miles to see the woman I love.”

Lara let out a noise that garnered both our attention. I’d forgotten she was here. As always, once Lawson entered a room, everything and everyone in it seemed to vanish. The bed springs groaned as she stood and rubbed her palms down the front of her jeans. Never in the weeks since I’d met her had I seen her smile so big.

“Sorry. Lara, is it?” Lawson stuck out a hand to her. Ever the gentleman. “Hi, I’m Lawson. Lawson Hill. We spoke on the phone.”

“Yep. Pleasure to meet you.” A wash of pink tinged Lara’s cheeks. Her eyes darted to me.

Wait. *What?*

“You two talked?” I blinked, processing. “About me?”

“Only briefly.” Lara let go of Lawson’s hand, tucked a braid behind her ear.

“Why?”

Her brow wrinkled. “Well, I didn’t want him to get lost on campus. How many times were you late to class, because you took a wrong turn during that first week? It’s a big place.”

My mouth dropped open.

“It really is a big place,” said Lawson. “I appreciate you texting me the layout, where to park, how to get to the right dorm.”

“Court,” Lara corrected. “And it’s no big deal.”

“No big deal?” Anger coiled around my chest, rushed up the sides of my neck. “This is a straight up violation of trust and privacy and... and...*trust*.”

Lara rolled her eyes as if she was dealing with a petulant teenager. “Yeah. Okay. So, I’m gonna go. Give you two some privacy. Nice to meet

finally meet you, Lawson.”

“Thanks, Lara. Likewise.” The door clicked shut and Lawson’s gaze found mine.

We were alone. Sharing the same small space. In utter silence.

I licked my lips. “What are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Gosh, Harper, you look beautiful.” He started toward me. “Feels like it’s been months since I’ve—”

“Hey, hold on a second.” I thrust out a hand, backed up a step. Distance. I had to set distance. Four thousand miles, as he’d put it, was a whole lot of ocean, but now he was here, and I was grossly unprepared.

“—laid eyes on you.” Two perpendicular lines formed between his brows. “So, that’s it, then? This is how it’s going to be? You running away, me chasing you, only to find out you’re unhappy to see me?” He ran splayed fingers through his hair, turned away from me.

Hands set to his hips, his gaze raked the room. He took in everything. The portraits, the tiny desk and chair, the small pile of clothes on the floor I needed to take to the laundry. His face revealed nothing. Indeed, it was as if he was merely educating himself for a paper he had to write later.

Or maybe a song.

My throat tightened and I lifted my chin, set my jaw. Now was not the time to get emotional. “How is Bella?”

His eyes connected with mine. “Fine. She’s fine. Good. My mom, she loves her.” His gaze flitted to my stomach, back up to my eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“Good.” Horrible.

His throat dipped. “You haven’t been sick or anything? Nauseated?”

“Not right this second, no. Sometimes, yes. My doctor says—”

“You’ve seen a doctor? You didn’t—sorry.” He lifted a hand in apology. “I just wish I could’ve...” He passed the same hand over his hair, shoved it in his jacket pocket. “You were saying?”

“She says the morning sickness will eventually go away. That—can I ask you something?”

His head jerked. Brows lowered. “Of course.”

I shifted on my feet. “Why did you come here? You traveled all this way to what? Ask me how I’m feeling?”

“Harper.” He exhaled an airy chuckle, shook his head.

“No, I’m serious.” I moved closer to him.

Then did the unthinkable.

I took his hand. The contact made us both draw in a sharp breath. As if for these three weeks we’d been apart, a piece of each of us had been missing.

“Your career’s been picking up,” I said. “Interviews, shows, music videos.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’ve been watching?”

“The negative narratives are finally fading. People love your new music. *I* love your new music.”

“And you’ve been listening?” His eyes narrowed even further.

“Why would you risk any of that?” I tightened my hold on his hand. For emphasis. For selfishly wanting to steal his warmth a little longer. “Why take the chance that you’ll spend another several weeks at the mercy of the tabloids?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I was never at their mercy.”

“Lawson.”

“I’m at *your* mercy, Columbus. Have been since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Much as I wanted to—knew I *needed* to—push Lawson back out the door, I couldn’t muster the strength to do it again. Not with his determined glare, shimmering with so many emotions, pinning me to the very spot where I stood. His eyes. Those eyes always told me everything. I didn’t stand a chance of winning this battle.

“You want to know why I came?”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “Yes, I do.”

“Because I want you to come home.”

His words didn’t compute, and I reacted with, “I can’t leave school. There’s no way—”

“I’m your home, Harper.” He enclosed my one hand in both of his. “Just like you’re mine. If it’s your job or your education, as it were, that’s holding you someplace, then that’s where I want to be, too. Wherever you are, I belong with you. And you belong with me.”

That did it. One moment I was fine. A little misty-eyed, sure, but otherwise in relative control of my emotions. The next?

I was bawling like a newborn.

“Harper.” Lawson took me in his arms, breathed in my hair. Held me close. “Please don’t cry.”

“I c-can’t h-help...”

“Shh.”

My anger flared. “Don’t shush me.”

“Fine. I won’t shush you.”

For minutes, he held me. I cried. All the ache I’d kept cooped up for weeks burst out like water gushing from a rock. No dam. No spicket to turn it off. I trembled in his arms. Soaked his shirt with my tears. There might’ve been snot on his jacket.

But he held me. Without a word. Without so much as a gentle murmur or another *shh*.

When I finally opened my mouth to speak, the words came out in a warbled whisper. “You are the k-kindest, most gentle man I’ve ever known.”

“Harper,” he breathed.

“No, listen.” I gripped the lapel of his jacket. “You say and do what’s in your heart. And it’s a wonderful place there, Lawson, your heart. Full of warmth and love and understanding. Compassion, patience. And honestly?” Tears continued to leak from my eyes, skating down my cheeks. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Harper.”

“I don’t. You’re everything and I’m...” My teeth chattered—*dammit*. “I’ve got a father who’s in prison, a penchant for making bad decisions, apparently.” I turned my face into his chest, wishing I could hide from the shame, the deep guilt I still felt for not putting the pieces together sooner about my dad. It wasn’t my fault. I realized that, sure I did. But I couldn’t stop the tide of emotions that rose every time I looked back. Every conversation, every carefully calculated move, the most pivotal being our relocation to Nashville.

The move that geographically separated my father from what he’d done, or so he’d thought.

The move that brought me to a boy with sparkling blue eyes. The boy who taught me it was okay to need someone.

“I messed up,” I said. “I messed us up, Lawson, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I left like I did. I’m sorry I didn’t have the c-courage...”

“No, Harper.” His arms tightened around me. “You don’t have to be sorry. Not for anything.” He stroked my hair. “And you don’t owe me an explanation. Not me, not anyone. Do you understand? God, baby. I love you so much. Please stop crying.”

“I’m p-pregnant, Lawson. I always cry.”

His hands bracketed my shoulders, and he dipped his head, urging my eyes to meet his. “It doesn’t matter that you left or how you left. Because you and me? We’re not done, and I would’ve followed you anywhere, Harper. I will follow you anywhere.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Because I love you. With all that I am, I love you. And I want to be with you, no matter where you are. Nashville, London or in a cardboard box on some desert island, where we have to spear fish and walk around naked.”

A wobbly laugh escaped me.

“If I’m with you, I’m home.” His eyes shut and he pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead. “Make a home with me, Harper,” he whispered against my skin.

Those six words, so simple yet so profound, breathed life into me.  
They healed every wound, sealed each scrape and cut.

My heart was full of him.

“I love you, Harper.” He kissed my lips. My face was in his hands. “I love you.”

“I love you, Lawson.” And nothing had ever felt truer.

## epilogue

“I FORGOT THE MILK.” I tilted my head back, stared at the ceiling of our tiny flat in our tiny kitchen that could only hold one of us at a time.

Especially since my belly took up almost the entire space between countertops.

“Did we tell Alexa?” Lawson squeezed past me with a bag of carrots in one hand, celery in the other. He was making soup. His mom’s recipe. She’d emailed it to him last night after we’d Facetimed. We did that at least once a week, just to check in and for her to coo over how big my stomach was getting.

“Probably not.” I scratched the bridge of my nose. “I’ve gotta get better at that.”

“Don’t sweat it, okay? I’ll pick some up tomorrow on my way back from the studio.” His hands framed my face, coaxing my gaze to meet his. “What did we say we were gonna do?”

“Not sweat the small stuff.” Which, to Lawson, was pretty much everything.

I’d applied and been approved for a place off campus, a *family flat*, as they put it. In reality, we could’ve fit our entire apartment into Lawson’s Nashville kitchen. But it wasn’t just that.

Lawson had to make arrangements with his label to come here. Contractual arrangements. From what Savana had said, it hadn’t been



easy. Lawyers were involved. Hours spent at conference room tables, poring over pages of entertainment law. Lawson Hill wasn't just a man—he was a brand. One in which many had invested. To some degree, they owned him. He couldn't just up and leave without working out tour, recording and appearance details.

He'd pushed, though. Katie said she'd never seen him so determined. *He couldn't sleep*, she'd told me. *Wouldn't listen to anyone who presented obstacles instead of solutions. He had to get to you.*

And in exchange for his success in getting his way, he'd given up almost everything he'd grown accustomed to. His gated mansion. His large recording studio. The support team who'd been with him since the beginning.

All for me.

Never once had he uttered a complaint.

Quite the opposite, he was more optimistic than a SoulCycle instructor. The move, the apartment, the sharp change in his musical career, the fact he couldn't find real southern fried chicken in London to save his life. All trivial to him. Not even obstacles, he'd said. More like minor divots in the pathway.

He'd put together a new band. Found a small but decent recording studio. And we were happy. Cramped and out of our element, but happy.

"That's right." His thumb swabbed my cheek and with an ease that never failed to amaze me, he molded his lips to mine.

I loved kissing him. I loved kissing him so much sometimes I wished we didn't have to stop. That breathing wasn't necessary, and we could just kiss forever. And maybe that was ridiculous. Certainly, no two people could kiss forever. But with Lawson I couldn't get enough. Couldn't stop wanting him, needing him, longing for his company, his touch and, yes, his kisses.

He pulled back, kissed me on the nose. "I love you. Did you know that?"

“Well, you know, I was getting a little suspicious.”

His face lit up. He kissed me again, lighter this time. Pulled me close, or as close as he could, considering the enormous beach ball between us. “Fine. Then, have I told you lately how amazing I think your name would sound with mine?”

I tucked my lower lip between my teeth. He had.

“Harper Hill.” He rubbed my upper arm as I laid my head against his chest, my arms wrapped around his waist. “I mean, that sounds better than my name. Like way better. We could even hyphenate it, if you want. Harper Evans-Hill. Like a big screen actress or something.”

“Lawson?”

“Yeah, babe.”

I held up my left hand.

Where he’d placed an engagement ring two months after we’d moved into the flat.

“Oh, that’s right!” He’d called me the actress, but of course he was the more dramatic of the two of us. “You know about that, too.”

“Kinda.”

And this was our life. Sure, we had to work at it. School took up a lot of my time. Lawson stayed busy, too. Writing, playing, recording, then writing more. His fame was simpler here. Easier. Most days, we were able to go out without him being bombarded by fans. But there were other instances when we couldn’t grab a quick bite to eat without at least one person recognizing him. Which inevitably led to another and another, autographs on napkins and receipts, and us fleeing back to our apartment.

Before, whenever I looked ahead at my life, at how I imagined it turning out, I never once thought I’d be with someone the whole world knew. Sure, every little girl dreams she might one day meet and marry a prince. But in reality? Well. Reality’s however we make it. Step by step, day by day. And while princes may’ve been meant for fairytales, I

couldn't imagine a finer man than the one who told me daily how much he loved me. How much he needed me.

He gave me a final squeeze and I made a sound. I ached everywhere those days. My knees, my back, my boobs.

"You okay?" His gaze traveled up and down my body, as if searching for a cut he could bandage. "Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine. I just—" Apparently peed my pants.

We looked down at the same time. That's something I knew about, too. Our minds, connected like train cars, running on the same track. We'd been together right at a year, and yet it felt as if it'd always been me and Lawson. That there hadn't ever been a time when we weren't an *us*.

His gaze met mine, panicked. "I don't have the bag packed." He was right. We didn't. I wasn't due for another three weeks.

"Babe, it's fine, I—"

But he was already running toward the bedroom, presumably to throw clothes and toiletries into an overnighter.

"—thought we agreed not to sweat the small stuff." I smiled to myself. Shook my head. Waddled toward the bedroom to see what I could do to help, if anything.

There was a lyric Lawson liked. To be fair, there were loads he liked. Beautiful lines of prose he murmured and sang at any given moment. In the shower, while he cooked or cleaned, as we were walking hand in hand in the park. But this one. This one struck me in that particular moment. A line from a Moody Blues song he had on an old vinyl record.

*Well, I've had dreams enough for one. And I've got love enough for three. I have my hopes to comfort me. I've got my new horizons out to sea.*

New horizons. That's what we had, Lawson and me. Every turning page of our life together, every day brought something new. Something beautiful and precious.

Something that would last a lifetime.

**The End**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alyssia Kirkhart is the author of *Betrothed*, *Enraptured*, *Return to Me*, *Obedience*, *Surrender*, and the bestselling *Symbolon* series: *The Other Half*, *The Second Curse* and *Three to Shatter*. She lives in Louisiana with her husband and three boys.

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